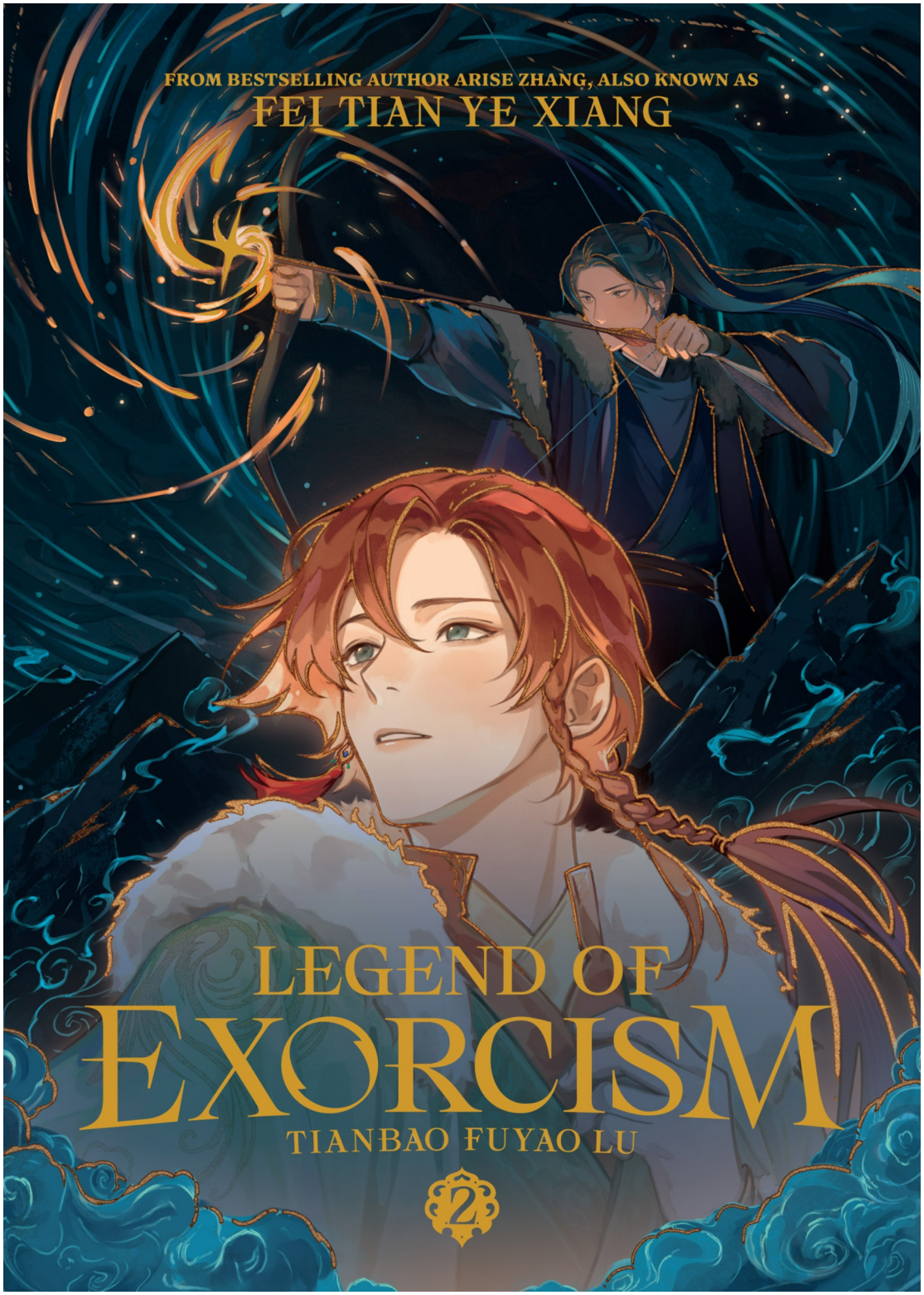
FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
FEI TIAN YE XIANG
LEGEND OF
EXORCISM
TIANBAO FUYAO LU
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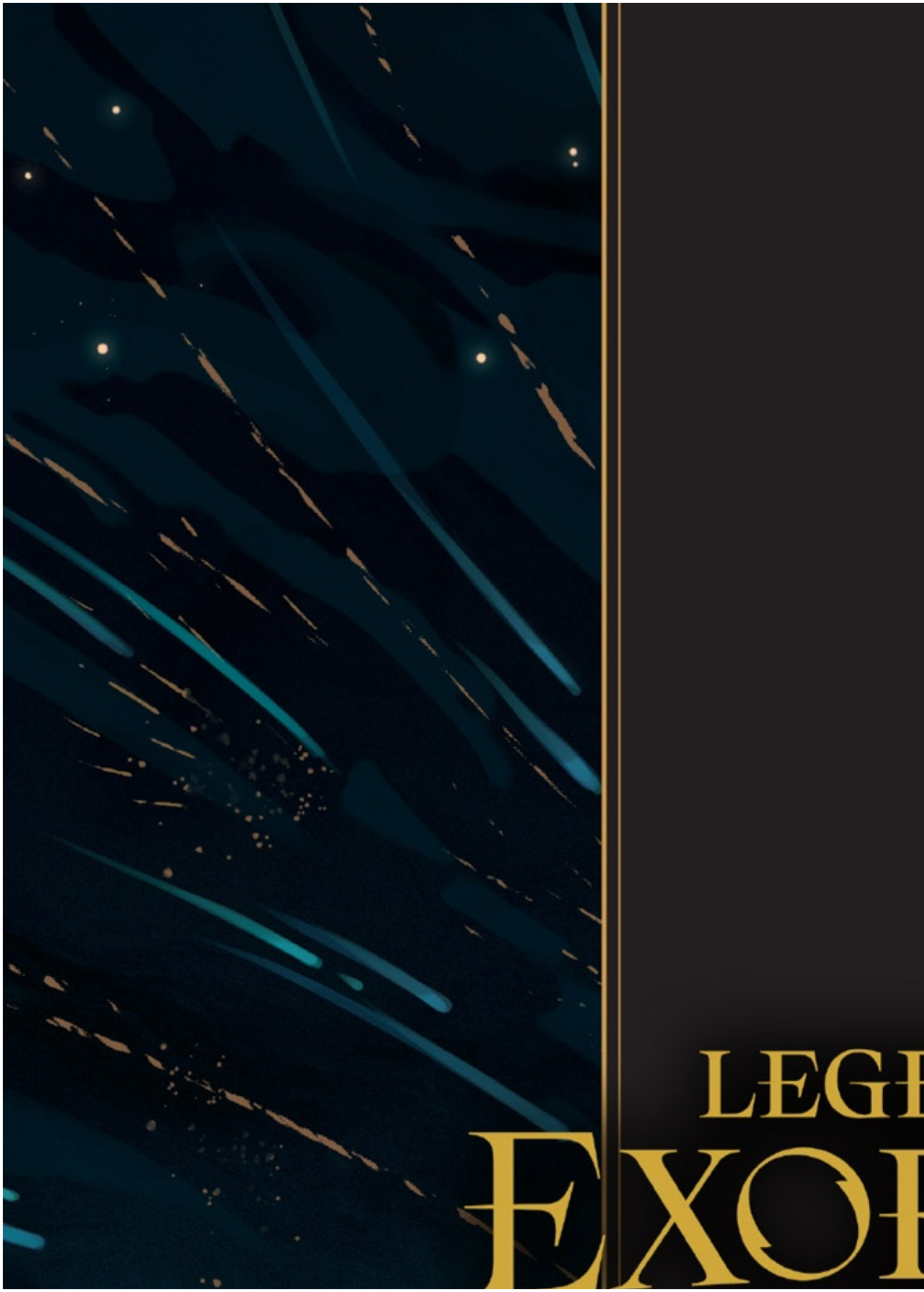
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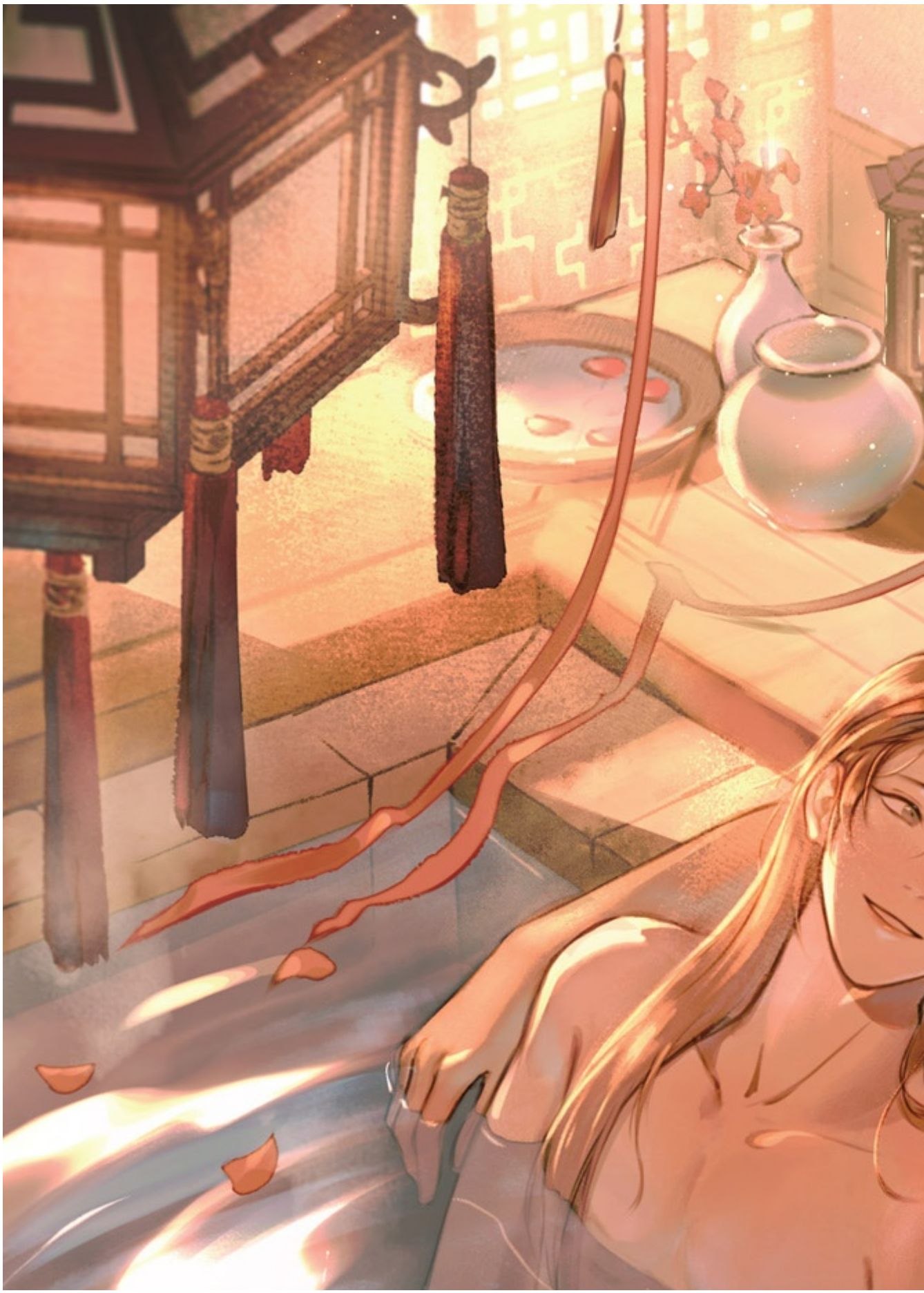

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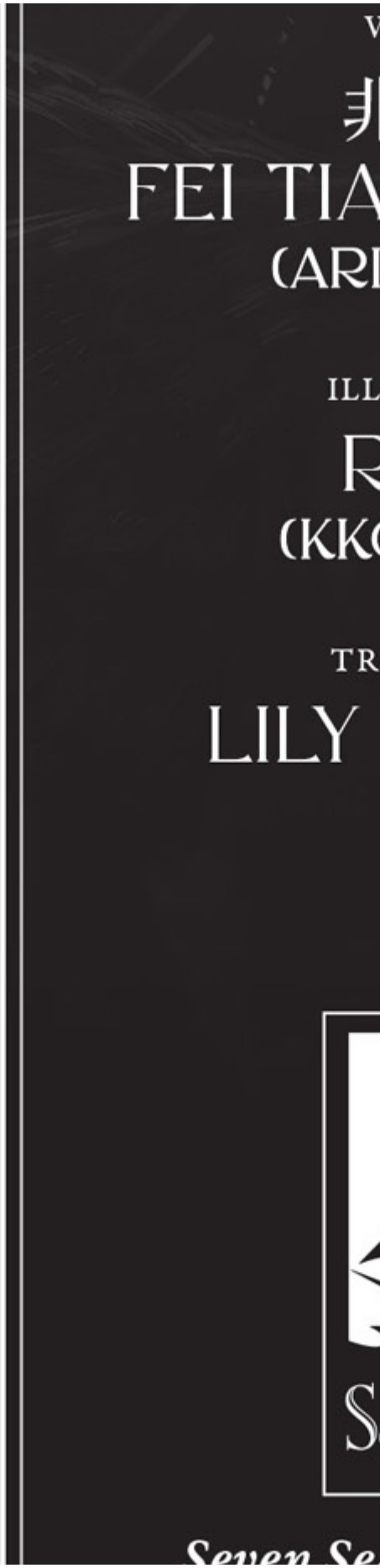
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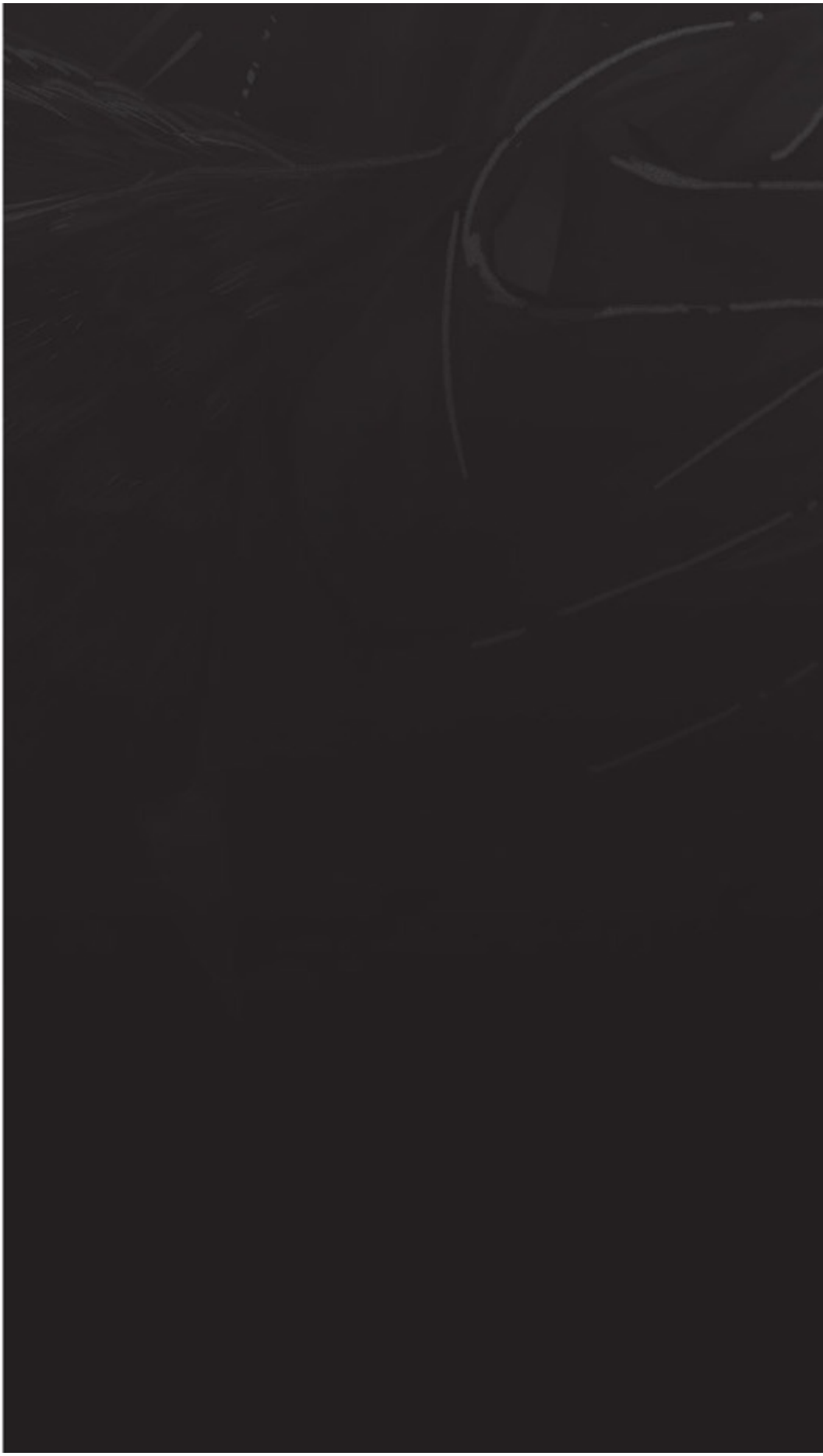


Chapter 27:
The Spring Oriole

EVEN THE GRIM autumn breeze couldn't dampen the exorcists' joy as Li Jinglong led them to a brothel that evening by Li Longji's imperial edict.

"*Behave*, everyone," he instructed before they entered.

"Aiya! If it isn't Commandant Li! Ah no, Chief Li!"

The Spring Oriole was Chang'an's largest and most luxurious entertainment house and brothel. It was grander and more opulent than the genteel Poetess's Pavilion or the exotic Windblown Camel's Bell, and better suited to their party's tastes this evening.

"S-s-stay away from me!" Li Jinglong broke out in goosebumps as a girl latched onto his arm. He dragged Hongjun over to serve as a barrier, but it was Hongjun's first proper visit to such an establishment—he darted behind Li Jinglong in alarm.

"You're the one who wanted to come to Pingkang Ward," Li Jinglong said. "Why are you hiding?"

Li Jinglong's smug chiding was a bit too loud; Hongjun's entire face went crimson. He finally understood what Li Jinglong experienced on a daily basis.

"Aiya! It's that young foreign lad!"

The first girl called out to the others, who promptly swarmed A-Tai en masse. A-Tai, it seemed, was already famous in Pingkang Ward and perfectly comfortable strolling into a house of ill repute.

"I'm not performing today," A-Tai said. "I'm here to listen."

The women watched forlornly as the proprietress came over and led the exorcists inside. The performances had yet to begin, and the guests were chatting among themselves. At Li Jinglong's entrance, however, everyone fell silent.

Li Jinglong crossed the hall to where there was a small pond set in the floor, populated with brocade carp. He shook out the cloth sack he was holding and dumped the carp yao Zhao Zilong in.

"Have fun," Li Jinglong said.

"Thanks!" The carp yao popped his head out of the water to reply before happily swimming toward the school of fish. As the fish scattered in fright, Zhao Zilong grabbed one of the brocade carp and cried, "Ladies, don't go!"

The buzz of conversation soon rose again. The imperial examination case had become a topic of gossip for all of Chang'an, and the entire city was in an uproar over the fact that Li Jinglong had captured real yao. There had been no way to keep such a significant event quiet, and rumors flew through the city as if on wings. The tale grew wilder with each telling, until everyone was speculating about these mysterious exorcists.

An attendant led them to the largest couch in the main hall, set up a privacy screen around them, and invited them to sit. Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai settled on the right, while Li Jinglong, Hongjun, and Mergen took their seats on the left. Li Jinglong requested the attendants set up a smaller screen blocking off the two members of their group who were regulars in these halls, lest the sight of Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai's activities corrupt any little children.

The group sat facing the center of the bright, open main hall. Its spacious interior occupied nearly three thousand square feet, and the decor was extravagantly sumptuous. Women's laughter echoed from behind the folding screens scattered throughout the room. Looking up, Hongjun saw that the Spring Oriole was made up of three floors, each ceiling higher than the last. A wooden bridge spanned the open space at the very top of the hall, strung with colorful lanterns that gave the whole a dreamlike atmosphere.

"Young Masters, are there any girls you prefer?"

"No." Li Jinglong neatly rebuffed the proprietress's inquiry.

"Then I'll have some girls…"

"No need," Li Jinglong said.

"The other two young masters, do you need…"

"No," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun and Mergen both gave him a look. "What are we here for again?" asked Hongjun.

Mergen held back a chuckle. "You'll have to ask the chief. I have no idea."

Popping a few of the grapes set out on the table into his mouth, Li Jinglong said, "We'll enjoy the music, watch the dances, and reward the performers. Then, we'll go back to the Department of Exorcism to sleep."

"Will there be dancing later?" Hongjun asked.

"There will be, and there'll be qin performances… Mergen, if you want to find yourself a girl, go sit on the other side."

Mergen laughed. "I told you, I'm saving myself for someone. I'm just here to listen to music tonight."

"Saving yourself?" Li Jinglong was a bit surprised.

Mergen pondered for a moment, then nodded. He didn't elaborate, and Li Jinglong didn't inquire further. "Chief," Mergen suggested, "why don't you get Hongjun…"

"He doesn't need any," Li Jinglong interrupted mercilessly. He turned to Hongjun. "Isn't that right?"

Remembering what Li Jinglong had explained to him that night outside the Poetess's Pavilion, Hongjun had been excited to experience the brothel. Li Jinglong's quick denial was like a bucket of cold water dumped over his head. He couldn't help arguing just a little. "Actually, I could…"

“Then go sit on the other side,” Li Jinglong said, pointing toward the screen concealing Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai. “This side is for proper gentlemen. Do you want to sit with us, or with them?”

Hongjun thought it over. “I’ll stay here.”

“You’d better be certain,” Li Jinglong said. “You won’t be allowed to switch sides again. We’re going to be eating cherry biluo later.”

“What? Eating what? What are cherry biluo? I’m not going. Then…can I have a drink?”

A drink was acceptable, Li Jinglong decided. He happily ordered a few plates and some liquor for Hongjun, then sent the attendant next door to General Han’s shop to buy some cherry biluo, a famous local delicacy. Hongjun was too easy to satisfy. Craving food and sex were human nature, but in the absence of sex, food would suffice—and the treats Li Jinglong described did sound delicious.

“Young Masters, you must at least have someone to pour your drinks when the entertainment starts,” the proprietress said as she returned. “May I have one of our girls serve you? She can sit in the corner and keep to herself.”

Li Jinglong was about to refuse again when Hongjun remembered something. “Do you have a girl here called Sang-er?”

The proprietress quickly replied that she did and ordered someone to bring the girl over. Li Jinglong grudgingly allowed it.

“I won’t get too touchy,” Hongjun assured him.

“You know the rules,” Mergen laughed.

Before long, Sang-er fluttered over, and Hongjun happily chirped a greeting. Sang-er was the first friend he had made in Chang’an, after all, and he was overjoyed to see her again. Sang-er was merely a maid who served the higher-ranking girls in the Spring Oriole; she had never expected a customer to request her by name, especially not one receiving their most expensive services. She was just as delighted.

Twin smiles bloomed on their faces when they saw each other. Sang-er looked Li Jinglong up and down, then glanced at Hongjun. Li Jinglong looked back at her with suspicion—what was Hongjun’s relationship with this girl?

At this point, Sang-er surprised them both by saying, “Oh? Commandant Li! You two are together now! When did this happen?”

Li Jinglong spat out his mouthful of water as Mergen collapsed, cackling, over the table.

“We’ve been together for a while!” Hongjun said with a smile. “Sang-er, can you pour our drinks? I’ll tip you!”

Sang-er knelt on the couch beside Hongjun with a smile and picked up the jug of liquor to pour their drinks. The jug contained top-shelf Lanling daqu, aged to a rich amber. Poured into the white porcelain cups, its scent suffused the air, just as Li Bai described in his poem “Journey to a Distant Land”: *Fragrant as turmeric, Lanling’s finest brew; served in jade cups, amber in hue*. It was the finest liquor in

the house.

"Just a sip," Li Jinglong said to Hongjun. "It's strong."

Snacking on dried fruit, Mergen joked, "Is this vinegar?"

"No way!" Sang-er exclaimed. "It's the finest liquor in the house!"

Mergen sniffed the air, then said, "Then what's that sour scent I smell…"[1]

Li Jinglong had no words—was Mergen implying he was jealous?!

Catching on, Sang-er giggled. "Young Master," she said to Hongjun, "why don't you sit a bit farther away, over there…?"

"Mergen, you—" Li Jinglong began.

Sang-er shooed Hongjun toward Li Jinglong, then shifted to sit next to Mergen.

"Good choice." Mergen chuckled.

Hongjun was mystified.

Now that he was sitting next to Li Jinglong, he turned to continue his chat with Sang-er, leaning against Li Jinglong's shoulder. Li Jinglong let Hongjun use him as a backrest and said no more. Soon after, the attendant returned with the cherry biluo, and everyone exclaimed in appreciation.

The little pastries consisted of a skin of egg dough wrapped around tender lamb leg, cheese, mallow strips, and flowering cabbage, and filled with cherry jam. They were steamed to perfection, crowding together as they puffed up inside the steamer basket, and finished with a sprinkle of chopped mint. The treats masterfully balanced both sweet and savory flavors; one could eat a whole basket without getting sick of them.

"What are you eating over there?" Qiu Yongsi poked his head around the screen. "From General Han's?" he cried out in amazement.

"It's only for our table," Li Jinglong said coolly. "If you want some, go buy them yourselves."

Li Jinglong had ordered four servings, but now that Sang-er was here, it was only polite to offer her one. After Hongjun scarfed down his own share, he asked, "Are there any more? We should buy some more."

Li Jinglong gave him his own pastry. He turned toward the main hall, wondering why the performance hadn't started; by the time he turned to look at Hongjun again, the last cherry biluo had vanished.

“Are there any more?” Hongjun asked again.

“What are you, Zhao Zilong?!” Li Jinglong exclaimed. “Must you swallow your food whole?”

“But it’s all gone,” Hongjun said.

“Well, there’s no more,” Li Jinglong said. “It’s better if I don’t let you eat your fill. That way, you’ll appreciate it more when you remember it.”

Hongjun reluctantly let it go. He stared at the remaining piece in Mergen’s hand, but Mergen had already almost finished it.

“There are so many delicacies in the world,” Li Jinglong said. “I’ll take you to try all of them someday.”

Servants moved through the second- and third-floor balconies, dimming the lanterns. As the light in the main hall dimmed, the guests brought their conversations to a close. The bright sound of a bell rang through the dark, and a hush fell over the room.

The silence was broken by a fluttering pipa trill, fluid as water, calling to mind snow tumbling from a mountain peak and melting into a shower of droplets. As the first notes waned, several more pipas joined in to harmonize with the soloist. They supported their leader like the myriad birds bowing to their phoenix king, swooping through the rafters before soaring into the sky.

The audience roared with approval at the masterful performance, and Hongjun forgot all about replying to Li Jinglong. He stared toward the center of the hall in wonderment.

Next came the call of an oriole—imitated by one of the musicians—and the folding screens lit up one by one. The girls waiting behind them each held a colored glass bowl containing a single lamp, casting a multicolored glow as they streamed toward center stage. Dancers appeared one after another on the second- and third-floor balconies, each as lovely as the last. They performed a synchronized birdlike dance with airy paper lanterns cupped between their hands and flowing lengths of silk tied around their waists, which streamed down toward the ground floor.

“Wow…” Hongjun had never seen anything like this.

“The Spring Oriole lives up to its name,” Li Jinglong said.

As the colored glass lamps flickered like a cluster of flowers in spring, dancers bent their bodies toward the seated audience, smiling sweetly. Some of the attendees had seen this dance before, but nevertheless shouted out in appreciation.

“How lovely!” Hongjun sighed.

Like a vivacious flock of orioles singing an ode to spring, the dancers holding their colored lamps gathered in the middle of the stage then scattered to its far corners, revealing a multi-sided revolving screen set toward the back of the hall. A slender figure stood behind it with a pipa in hand—the soloist who had led the first song.

Her pipa trilled again, and the woman opened her ruby lips in song. “*Morning rains in Wei City dampen the dust of the road, the guesthouse willows are verdant*

as new replaces old…”

Hongjun nearly jumped in shock. “Song of Yang Pass” was the most popular yuefu[2] song in Chang’an. Although he had heard it countless times since his arrival, it was an altogether different experience under the bright vernal lights as points of illumination sparked to life all around him.

Sang-er bowed and slipped away to fetch a fresh jar of liquor. Already tipsy, Hongjun leaned back against Li Jinglong’s shoulder and stared vacantly at the pipa player, quietly singing along. “*Dear friend, let us stay and have one more drink before you go…*”

Li Jinglong’s fingers tapped out the rhythm on the table next to Hongjun’s hand. They sang the next line together: “*There are no friends to be found…beyond Yang Pass on the road…*”

The dancers pushed the couch on which the pipa player sat, sliding it toward the area where Li Jinglong and Hongjun were seated. The lyrics shifted to a segment written by another poet. “*Yan grass grows soft like threads of jade, Qin mulberry trees hang full and sage…*”[3]

“Li Bai! It’s one of Li Bai’s!” Hongjun bolted upright upon hearing his idol’s verses in the performer’s soft voice.

Li Jinglong couldn’t help but chuckle, placing a hand on Hongjun’s shoulder as the pipa player arrived before them. She gazed into Hongjun’s eyes as she sang, “*When you begin to miss the olden days, my heart already cracks and bleeds with pain…*”

A smile appeared on Hongjun’s face. It was truly a beautiful performance.

Seeing the pipa player smile back at him, Li Jinglong’s face went cold again.

“O spring breeze, we are strangers on this stage; why lift the veil and rouse my sorrow so?” The beautiful pipa player lowered her lashes with this final line, a hint of sorrow seeming to swim in her eyes to accompany the mellow tone of her voice. Her seat was pushed away again.

The audience cheered in approval. Many tried to offer gifts, but the pipa player merely flashed the room a brilliant smile.

The roar of fire came from high above. Startled, Hongjun snapped his head up to find that the servants had lit a giant revolving lantern suspended in the cavernous space above the third floor. The Spring Oriole was bright as day as the lantern cast countless shadows in the shape of black-naped orioles against the folding screens below; the lantern’s screen began to spin slowly overhead, and a great flock of birds seemed to swoop through the room.

By the time Hongjun glanced back at the stage, the pipa player had vanished behind the turning screen. The seat slowly rotated to reveal a tall and thin middle-aged man holding a pipa.

The female dancers withdrew, letting the man command the stage in the brightly lit hall. This musician seemed to have no use for showy flourishes. He simply strummed the pipa strings, then began to sing. “*The red bean of the south puts forth its sprouts by spring; take more before you go—this handful represents*

longing."[4]

Hongjun was floored. The caliber of this man's voice was in no way inferior to A-Tai's. A-Tai had a clear and ringing voice, while this man's was deep, resonant, and a little hoarse. But like A-Tai, his voice had a penetrating quality when he sang that aimed straight for the listener's heart. Hongjun's scalp prickled with exhilaration.

An uproar broke out among the guests. Someone shouted out the name of the musician, only to be immediately shushed by the audience. The sound of dishware crashing to the floor came from behind the adjacent privacy screen.

Hongjun turned to Li Jinglong. "He's amazing! Who is he?"

"Li Guinian," Li Jinglong answered with a faint smile, his eyes fixed on the performer.

Hongjun recognized the name of the capital's top musician. The performer nodded and smiled at Li Jinglong from the stage. Hongjun was shocked. "You know him?"

Li Jinglong hummed in affirmation, leaning back against the screen and throwing an arm over Hongjun's shoulder to pull him closer. He said lazily, "This guy wouldn't usually play at the Spring Oriole. He's here for my sake."

Only then did Hongjun realize Li Jinglong had specially invited Li Guinian to perform.

Li Guinian strummed his pipa again, launching into a different verse: "*Spring rivers surge level with the sea, tides push the moon above the ocean shore…rushing downstream with the water's flow, along rivers lit with the moon's soft glow*."[5]

The light of the revolving lantern faded, and the female musicians streamed back into the center of the room to line up behind Li Guinian. They picked up their pipas and played, harmonizing with Li Guinian's low voice. The song swelled like an ocean tide, while the lantern overhead illuminated the room like the spring moon casting its cool veil of light across the land.

Hongjun was mesmerized. After the line, *"The setting moon slants beneath the ocean mist, a vast distance lies 'twixt Jieshi and Xiaoxiang,"* Li Guinian's voice softened as he sang: *"Old friends, will you return on a moonlit eve? Moonbeams write parting across the river trees."*

The pipa music ebbed away with the end of the tumultuous tale, and Hongjun's heart slowly settled back into his chest. The main hall gradually dimmed.

"Can we invite him over?"

"Li Guinian's not selling his body," Li Jinglong said in bewilderment, also pleasantly drunk.

"I want to ask him to teach me to sing." Hongjun could hardly contain his excitement. "He's so amazing!"

"Have you forgotten me so quickly?" A-Tai said from the other side of the screen, aggrieved.

Hongjun laughed. “I would love to see you two on the same stage someday. Chang’an would riot.”

“I’m afraid I’m no match for him,” A-Tai said.

“Chief, you know Li Guinian?” Qiu Yongsi asked. “You never mentioned it before.”

“I was a frequent patron of his performances before he was famous,” Li Jinglong replied. “Now that he’s one of the emperor’s favorite musicians, I can no longer afford to hire him; I merely took advantage of our acquaintance to convince him to come play for us here tonight.”

The hall lit up again, this time with multiple melodies weaving in and out of one another. The women launched into the famed Dance of Rainbows and Feathers, but compared to Li Guinian’s performance, the songs and dances that followed seemed as dull as chewing on wax. Hongjun remained entranced by Li Guinian’s song, the strains of “The Moon over the River on a Spring Evening” echoing through his head for the rest of the night.

Shortly before midnight, the music came to an end and the performers retired for the night. It was past the city’s curfew, so the drunken guests all staggered upstairs with their companions to sleep until morning.

After drinking liquor like water all evening, Hongjun was sprawled flat on the table. Li Jinglong shook his shoulder. “Hey, ready to go home?”

When Qiu Yongsi came around the screen to ask about their plans, Li Jinglong said everyone was free to do as they wished. Mergen got up to go look at the autumn moon, while Li Jinglong prepared to carry Hongjun home. But the night was colder than expected, and he eventually settled for putting up another screen in the main hall and making do until morning.

Reeking of alcohol, Hongjun gazed up at Li Jinglong. “Chief…”

Li Jinglong was also dead-drunk. “Do you want some water?” he asked.

“Give…give me back my heart lamp.” Hongjun giggled. “I want to go home.”

When Li Jinglong didn’t answer, Hongjun turned over and fell asleep. At a loss, Li Jinglong lay down in his clothes beside Hongjun.

He awoke near dawn, considerably more sober. Mergen was already long gone, so Li Jinglong shook Hongjun awake and said they were going home.

As they rode their horses toward Jiuqu Bridge, Li Jinglong slowed his pace. Noting how Hongjun remained silent behind him, he asked, “Should we get down and walk for a bit?”

The morning fog was heavy in the fall, and Hongjun was freshly sober. The cold wind made him want to puke, which he did almost the instant they crossed the bridge. When he straightened up again, Li Jinglong was there with a bamboo flask of water for him to rinse his mouth.

Hongjun staggered over to a maple tree and grasped its trunk for support, suddenly longing for home. Recalling the dance of a hundred birds and the music like orioles singing in chorus from the night before, he was reminded of the wisps of gilt-edged clouds that trailed over Yaojin Palace and was hit by a wave of terrible homesickness.

"When I broke your heart lamp, did that make it so you can't go home?" Li Jinglong frowned, examining Hongjun's face.

Hongjun slid down to sit at the base of the tree, prepared to rest until the restaurants opened in the market and they could get breakfast. His head was still spinning. "My home—I'll bring you home with me sometime. The rear mountain has…so many birds."

Li Jinglong smiled, sitting down beside him. "When?"

"Hmm… First thing tomorrow morning…"

Hongjun sprawled out across Li Jinglong's lap, and Li Jinglong didn't push him off. Maple flowers showered down around Jiuqu Bridge as Hongjun laid his head on Li Jinglong's chest, perfectly content. He used to take afternoon naps just like this at Yaojin Palace, sprawled out across some tree branch like a lounging panther. The ceiling of leaves had whispered in the wind then, a calm and carefree melody.

"Hey," Li Jinglong said. His head was beginning to ache. "Wake up, let's sleep at home… Get up."

Hongjun didn't respond. Li Jinglong let his head drop to the side, his breaths turning slow and even, and fell asleep at the base of the tree.

A carriage drove across Jiuqu Bridge, wheels clacking against the paving stones. The Duchess of Guo lifted her curtain and spotted two shapes through the fog. Li Jinglong leaned against a tree trunk beneath the canopy of red maple leaves, with Hongjun sprawled on top of him, drunk as a skunk.

"My lady," her companion, a man wrapped in a cloak, quietly prompted her.

"What is that young man's background?" the Duchess of Guo asked, her voice bleak.

The man shook his head. "Xuan Yin looked into him, but she couldn't find anything."

The Duchess of Guo turned back to look at her companion. The man removed his cloak, revealing a hideous, malevolent face corded with bulging tendons. Two pairs of fangs, one top and one bottom, protruded from his mouth. A brand, partially encircling the base of his neck, marked him as Yazi, one of the dragon's nine sons.

"Notify Baxia and Suanni," said the Duchess of Guo. "When the time comes, they're to move on their own. Capture Li Jinglong, flay him, and hang his skin over the gates of Chang'an."

"We can move tonight. No matter how strong these exorcists are, there are only five of them. They're no match for us and Xuan Yin."

“Slow and steady; we’re in no hurry,” the Duchess of Guo said. “Great Tang’s fate has yet to run its course. Before it does, we must avoid inciting an all-out war, lest we invite a heavenly tribulation down upon our heads.”

Yazi bowed and slipped out of the carriage. The carriage clattered away from Jiuqu Bridge, driving toward the Imperial Palace.

Chapter 28:
Murder Spree

THAT AFTERNOON, the Deputy Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, Huang Yong, paid them a personal visit.

"Chief Li!" Huang Yong called. He was accompanied once again by Lian Hao, the registrar, as well as a porter carrying a lacquered chest, which he delivered into the courtyard.

Hair a loose mess about his shoulders and head still aching from the previous night's indulgence, Li Jinglong emerged to receive their guests with a deep frown. After the imperial examination case, the Court of Judicial Review no longer dared to turn up their noses at Li Jinglong. He had performed a great service for the nation, after all, and enjoyed the emperor's favor.

Huang Yong pasted a grin on his face and said amicably, "You were sleeping? You must excuse us; we've come at a bad time. Your Department of Exorcism must have been working to capture yao all night…"

The sun had been high in the sky by the time Li Jinglong hauled Hongjun home. After letting Hongjun use him as a bed all morning, he felt like his arms and legs were about to fall off, and he could barely open his eyes. "This way, please. I'm the one who's been impolite. Allow me to get a change of clothes…" he trailed off, exhausted.

"Go back to bed!" Huang Yong insisted. "These are cases the Court of Judicial Review is transferring to you. We'll leave them here."

Li Jinglong was fully awake now. He stared blearily at the lacquered chest for so long that Huang Yong eventually said, "If you need anything, just let Lian Hao know."

Lian Hao quickly chimed in to agree, and without waiting another moment, he and Huang Yong fled out the door as fast as their legs could carry them.

Li Jinglong watched them go in shock. He stepped forward and opened the chest. It was crammed with what must have been over two hundred scrolls.

Some time later, the rest of the Department of Exorcism shuffled into the courtyard with dark bruises under their eyes. Hongjun was still singing, "*Spring rivers surge level with the sea*…" under his breath as he washed up, happily reminiscing about last night's adventure.

"Let's go again tonight," Qiu Yongsi suggested with a chuckle.

"I'm running out of money," complained A-Tai. "You still haven't paid me back the three thousand, two hundred silver I fronted last time."

"Don't worry, I can cover it," Hongjun said. "Let's go buy out the shop that makes the cherry biluo."

"An excellent idea!" Mergen declared. "That shop…"

Li Jinglong looked at them, eyes bleak like he had nothing left to live for. "You all *still* want to go out? We might as well disband. It's time to work."

After lunch, Hongjun stared at the pile of scrolls on the table. Everyone was dumbstruck.

"We only found a single cat," Mergen said. "This seems a bit much."

Li Jinglong tossed them each a scroll. "These are all difficult cases the Court of Judicial Review has been sitting on. Let's sort through them all first. We'll split up and start investigating tomorrow."

"Do these all involve yaoguai?" Hongjun asked.

"Since when were there this many yaoguai?" Qiu Yongsi laughed. "It must be because His Majesty and the noble consort showed us favor, so they're pushing all the cases they can't solve—and all the people they can't afford to offend—onto us."

"Mark all the cases that have nothing to do with yaoguai with 'No signs of monstrous activity' and return them to the Court of Judicial Review," Li Jinglong instructed them. "We'll ignore those."

Hongjun unrolled the scroll he was holding. "A peddler surnamed Qin died suddenly in his home in the middle of the night. What about this one?"

Li Jinglong took it, then tossed it aside after a quick skim. "He was murdered. It wasn't a yaoguai."

A-Tai read his next. "'On the second day of the eleventh month, four strings of coins disappeared from a home in the middle of the night…'"

Qiu Yongsi laughed. "Some kids must have stolen them for spending money."

"'A young child wouldn't stop crying at night and may be possessed…'" Mergen read from another scroll. "They should find a priest to recite a blessing. Why send this to the Department of Demonic Exorcism?"

"A mule spooked and ran away while on its way out of the city; its owner suspects it saw a monster… Is this some kind of joke?!" Li Jinglong was tempted to take his subordinates and go raze the Imperial Court of Judicial Review himself.

Hongjun picked up the scroll containing the murder case. "What happens if we don't investigate?"

"That's the Court of Judicial Review's problem," Li Jinglong said. "If we return it, they'll have no choice but to take the case up again."

"But if it's like you said," Hongjun protested, "and the Court of Judicial Review can't afford to offend the murderer, doesn't that mean they won't be able to investigate properly?"

"Then they'll have to let it go cold," Qiu Yongsi said.

Hongjun set the scroll aside.

Li Jinglong sighed. "Fine. We're not doing anything else anyway. If you want to investigate that one, go ahead."

Hongjun got to his feet and snatched the scroll back up.

Mergen pushed his chair back, ready to accompany him, but Hongjun waved him off. After changing into casual clothes, he left on his own.

Unable to sit still, Li Jinglong rose as well. “I should go check on him.”

“Yes, yes, of course Chief.”

“You should go check on him.”

“You should go right now!”

Li Jinglong went silent. He sat back down and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You three,” he began. “I think we need to have a serious discussion. Do you have some misunderstanding about why I take extra care of Hongjun?”

Hongjun passed through a number of wards before arriving in Guiyi Ward. The poorest residents of Chang’an lived here: The walls were ramshackle, each building pressed up against the next, with streams of sewage flowing through the alleys. He came to a single-family home with a courtyard piled high with a peddler’s miscellaneous goods. It was completely silent in the front courtyard. Hongjun picked up a fallen rattle drum and spun it a few times between his fingers.

A young man’s voice called out from inside, “If you like it, go ahead and take it. Leave some money in the jar.”

Hongjun pushed open the door and walked in. He saw a typical Chang’an peasant’s home, its windows covered with paper. A familiar set of armor was discarded at the entrance. It was the same kind Li Jinglong used to wear—the armor of the Longwu Guard. A young man who couldn’t have been much older than Hongjun was sitting on a couch, polishing a sword. He looked puzzled to see Hongjun.

“I’m here on official business from the Department of Exorcism,” Hongjun said, displaying his token. “I’m investigating a death at this residence. What was your relationship to the deceased?”

This was Hongjun’s first time investigating a case, but he successfully learned that this young man’s name was Qin Wu. He was nineteen years old, and he happened to be a former comrade of Li Jinglong’s.

Qin Wu set his sword aside and frowned. “The Department of Exorcism? Isn’t that Commandant Li’s new office? Why did they send you?”

Hongjun was perplexed. “Didn’t Peddler Qin…have an accident in the middle of the night?”

“My dad was murdered.” Qin Wu stood up and met Hongjun’s eyes. “It has nothing to do with the Department of Exorcism. You can go.”

Undeterred, Hongjun sat down on the edge of the couch. He said hesitantly, “Let me sit with you for a while.”

“There’s not much I can offer you in the way of hospitality,” replied Qin Wu. “Is Commandant Li doing all right?”

Hongjun said he was doing well. They sat together for some time. At last, Qin Wu let out a long sigh.

"Who killed him?" Hongjun asked.

"A member of the Yang household," Qin Wu said. "The junior procurer of Yang Guozhong's estate. He plotted with my stepmother to strangle my dad in the night. But there's nothing I can do; my family is too poor."

It was just as Qiu Yongsi had surmised. The Court of Judicial Review couldn't afford to offend someone connected to Chancellor Yang, so they had fobbed the case off on the Department of Exorcism. It seemed Hongjun had come for nothing. Still, he was reluctant to let it go. "What is the man's name? We can try the Court of Judicial Review again."

Qin Wu didn't answer, instead scrutinizing Hongjun's face. "I saw you at the training field outside the Longwu Garrison the other day. Does Commandant Li treat you well?"

Hongjun didn't know why he'd suddenly asked something so irrelevant. After a moment of thought, he said, "The chief is a great person."

Qin Wu hummed. "Well, treasure it while you can. And tell him not to worry about me."

Hongjun was mystified. He wanted to ask more, but Qin Wu was already on his feet, ready to see him to the door. Hongjun had no choice but to go. He found Qin Wu entirely too calm; in his place, Hongjun was certain he never could have managed it.

Not long after he saw Hongjun out, Qin Wu's door swung open again as he bent to pick up his sword. This time, it was Li Jinglong of all people. Qin Wu shot to his feet, and the two of them looked at each other in silence in the dim room.

Finally, Qin Wu said, "Com…Commandant Li…"

"When Hongjun found that case, I assumed it involved your family." Li Jinglong sighed and took a seat. "Where is your stepmother?"

"Observing the mourning period," Qin Wu said. "Forty-nine days in total, and after the final seven, she'll marry Zheng Wenbin. They've rented another place to stay in for the time being."

Li Jinglong sighed again. "The Yang family has become very powerful in recent years. There's not much you can do but live with your anger for now."

Qin Wu said nothing.

"We were comrades once, so I'll offer you this piece of advice," Li Jinglong continued. "It's not the right time to act just yet—but I promise I'll take this matter seriously."

"The Yang family hoards power; they are dogs riding high on their master's authority," Qin Wu said. "They trample the masses, beating women and children and taking the most fertile fields by force. They embezzle money and provisions meant for the imperial guard and the border garrisons. How long am I meant to

endure their reign of terror?"

"We must endure many offenses over the course of our lives, but one day, it will be resolved. Don't let it get to you. I'll remember this case."

Li Jinglong got up to leave. Qin Wu stared blankly at his back as he opened the door. Just as Li Jinglong was about to walk through, Qin Wu said, "Commandant Li—you haven't changed."

"Yes, I have," Li Jinglong said over his shoulder. He closed the door of the Qin home behind him.

The next day, more new cases arrived.

"How are there so many?" Hongjun cried. He hadn't even finished reviewing the cases from yesterday. Everyone was at their wits' end.

"Lian Hao!" Li Jinglong shouted. "Stop right there!"

"There's a murder case today!" Lian Hao dropped another giant pile of scrolls and fled in a trail of dust.

Bored with reading through cases, the exorcists decided to work in shifts. A-Tai, Mergen, and Qiu Yongsi would read in the morning, while Li Jinglong and Hongjun took their turn in the afternoon, with the carp yao supervising the whole endeavor. Those who weren't reading went out to verify the details of the cases; any case that had nothing to do with yaoguai would be sent back to the Court of Judicial Review.

"Qin Wu asked after you," Hongjun said as they looked through the latest pile of scrolls.

"What did he say?" Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun over the scroll he was holding.

"Were you friends before?" Hongjun asked, curious.

"Of a sort," Li Jinglong replied.

Hongjun watched him quietly until Li Jinglong blurted out, "When Xiao-Wu joined the Longwu Guard, he was about the same age as you."

"He betrayed you somehow, didn't he?" the carp yao asked, head buried in a scroll.

"Mm," Li Jinglong murmured in affirmation. As a commandant in the Longwu Guard, all his subordinates had admired his martial skills. But a certain incident during his second year, which happened to involve Qin Wu, had changed everything.

"An opportunity for promotion came up. Qin Wu's family was poor, so he wanted to seize his chance. I was a bit too close with him and my other subordinates, and Qin Wu made some comments about it to our comrades behind my back. That's why my…reputation in the guard was damaged."

"A man of almost twenty, still unmarried, who flirts with young lads all day long," the carp yao said. "I can see how people would get the wrong idea."

Li Jinglong's heart nearly stopped. "You—!"

Patting Li Jinglong's back soothingly, Hongjun asked, "What damage to your reputation? How was it damaged? Are you two talking about something I don't understand again?"

Li Jinglong opened his mouth and closed it again. The carp yao shot him a discerning look. "Well, was it true?"

"How could it possibly be true?" Li Jinglong demanded. "I'm innocent. I never touched him!"

There was no lack of attractive young men among the six divisions of the imperial guard. It was only natural that some of the unmarried youths became close. But in the army, training came first—they had their duty, and in times of crisis, they would be called upon to raise their weapons and die for the nation. The Longwu Guard in particular trained right beneath the emperor's nose; they couldn't afford to be slack in their discipline. Each squadron was rated on their performance both in training and in competition during events as major as the emperor's hunting expeditions and as minor as their regular training exercises on the first and fifteenth of each month. Anyone who fell behind even a little could expect scolding and humiliation. And on occasions when they served in the emperor's honor guard, they would have to stand in full armor for up to eight hours in the blazing sun.

Their days were intense, and the soldiers collapsed into bed as soon as they returned to their barracks and were asleep the moment their heads hit their pillows. Who had the energy to screw around? If they dragged their comrades down with their own poor performance, they might get beaten up by their squadmates in the middle of the night. If rumors about a cut-sleeve in the ranks started to spread, it would affect the entire squadron, turning them all into the laughingstock of the Guard.

Li Jinglong was only eighteen the year his bond with his comrades and his chances for a good marriage were destroyed. Qin Wu had suffered under Li Jinglong's harsh training in the past and held something of a grudge; his thirst for advancement coupled with his wish to see Li Jinglong forced out of his position as commandant led Qin Wu to instigate the entire farce. In the end, Qin Wu had gotten his promotion, and when Hu Sheng caught wind of the rumors, he transferred Li Jinglong to a different squadron. Li Jinglong's subordinates had maintained a careful distance from him ever since.

"He did all that to you?!" Hongjun finally understood that Qin Wu must have spoken out of guilt.

"Forget it," Li Jinglong said. "You shouldn't open up your heart to casual acquaintances. It was my mistake."

"Oh?" The carp yao perked up, seeming to read some deeper meaning in his words. He looked Li Jinglong up and down.

Li Jinglong couldn't resist peeking at Hongjun, who was still fuming over what Qin Wu had done. But with his paltry worldly experience, he hadn't drawn the same conclusions as his fish.

"Then, did you like Qin Wu?" Hongjun asked.

“No.” Li Jinglong was quick and clear in his response. “He was just young, and…and…” Li Jinglong looked down and spoke quietly, as if to himself. “His family was poor, so I tried to watch out for him. You don’t have to be angry on my behalf. I got over it long ago, and now that I’m in the Department of Exorcism where everyone has taken to each other like fish to water, that stuff couldn’t be further from my mind.”

Hongjun thought it over for a while. “Oh,” he concluded. As Li Jinglong was considering his next words, Hongjun turned to the carp yao and said, “I thought only males and females could do it. So, males and males can do it too.”

The carp and Li Jinglong both went silent.

After a moment, the carp yao said, “Right—but when males and males do it, they can’t have babies. I’ve no interest in doing it with male fish.”

“How do fish do it?” Hongjun was terribly curious.

The conversation was getting more and more awkward. Li Jinglong searched for an excuse to change the topic, but the carp yao barreled ahead. “Don’t you worry about it. Why do you need to know all that? The bottom line is, if you really fall in love with someone, there’s nothing for it. Some people like this and some like that; the human world contains myriad different experiences. Even if Chief Li likes men, so what? It’s not anyone else’s business. Come to think of it, Hongjun, didn’t you like that little fox before?”

“I didn’t like him!” Hongjun protested. “I just found him pitiful.”

Li Jinglong picked up a scroll and tossed it to Hongjun to end the conversation. “Take a look at this.”

TWELFTH YEAR OF TIANBAO,
FIFTH DAY OF THE ELEVENTH MONTH.

Incident: Attack on a merchant caravan (murder case).

Degree of Difficulty: Human.

Location: Pinghe Ridge.

Person(s) Involved: Kuchean merchant caravan from the Western Regions, number 22.

Case Details: On the afternoon of the fifth day of the eleventh month, a Kuchean merchant caravan passing through Pinghe Ridge in the Qinling Mountain Range was attacked. All twelve members of the caravan were killed by an unknown culprit. Yao involvement suspected. The case is hereby transferred to the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism.

Remuneration: The Kuchean merchants and Han Guolan, the Kuchean ambassador stationed in Chang’an, offer to meet and deliver their gratitude in person.

“Let’s check it out.”

“It’s getting late. Let’s go tomorrow,” Li Jinglong said.

As dusk fell, their three companions returned. Everyone came in out of the chilly autumn air and exchanged their findings over dinner.

"Did you go partying again?" Li Jinglong asked breezily, noting that the others only picked at their food.

"We went to look into a case where a man murdered his wife." Mergen frowned and took a sip of water. "A blacksmith and his wife got into an argument, and he beat her to death with a chisel and an iron hammer. There was brain matter everywhere… On the walls, the couch…"

"Stop!" Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai cried in unison. They had only just managed to wipe the sight from their minds. Hongjun continued tucking into his bowl of crab-roe porridge, unaffected.

"There was another case," A-Tai chimed in. "A patient went to a barefoot doctor with a fever and cough. The guy was a quack—he let the patient's blood and ended up bleeding him to death. The doctor ran for it, and the man's family carried the coffin over to make a fuss outside Chunlin Hall."

"Mm." Li Jinglong was still thinking about the attack on the merchant caravan. "Any other news?"

"Those are all the murder cases so far this month," A-Tai said.

"There've been this many murders since the start of the eleventh month?" Li Jinglong set down his chopsticks in shock.

"How frequently do murders usually occur in Chang'an?" Mergen asked. "Is this a lot?"

"To be precise, these murders all happened within the span of today and yesterday," Qiu Yongsi said.

"Three murder cases in two days. Counting the merchant caravan, fourteen people have died in total." Li Jinglong frowned. "That's a bit extreme."

"Don't forget, we still don't know where the yao king is hiding," A-Tai said.

"Is this a challenge from him?" Hongjun asked.

Li Jinglong sucked in a breath, frowning again, and didn't answer. After they finished their meal, he instructed everyone to go to bed so they could begin investigating early the next morning.

Later that night, Hongjun was rinsing his mouth beside the well when the carp yao popped his head out of the pond. "Hongjun."

Hongjun turned and raised a brow—*If you have something to say, just say it.*

"Have you ever met someone you wished to share the rest of your life with?" the carp yao asked.

Spitting out his mouthful of water, Hongjun sat down beside the pond. "What do you mean?"

"Someone you want to be with for your whole life, so much that you forget all your ambitions of jumping over the Dragon Gate. You want to be together until

you're both old, until the day of their death, and you'll want to be with them even then." The carp yao's mouth opened and closed, absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Sure," Hongjun said with a smile.

"Who?"

"Dad and Qing Xiong, of course."

"That's not what I meant," the carp yao said. "Never mind."

As the carp yao dove back into the water to go to sleep, Hongjun caught him by the tail and dragged him back out. "What did you mean then? Tell me."

"I mean someone you always want to be with, someone you feel so comfortable around that when you're with them, you don't need to think about anything at all…"

"Then, Chief Li," Hongjun said.

"Pah!" The carp yao made a noise of disgust.

"The chief is so reliable, and he's a good person too. I can leave everything up to him—isn't that what you said? Zhao Zilong, what's up with you? You've been so weird today."

"I fell in love with a brocade carp," the carp yao admitted.

"Huh?" Hongjun asked, "What do you mean?"

"I want to marry her," the carp yao said. "And be with her forever."

"Didn't you want to leap over the Dragon Gate?" Hongjun asked, taken aback. "You're not going to anymore?"

The carp yao set an elbow on the edge of the pond, propped his chin on his palm, and spat out bubbles. "I was just saying that to give myself something to look forward to. Everyone needs a goal in life, you know? Even if it's impossible to achieve."

Hongjun scratched his head. "What does *fall in love* mean?"

"Ay, you wouldn't understand." The carp yao sank into the water and looked up at Hongjun from the bottom of the pond, saying nothing more. Hongjun was about to fish him up and keep interrogating him when a series of urgent knocks came from the door.

When he opened it, a figure covered in blood rushed inside. "Help me…help me… Commandant… I'm sorry…help me…"

Chapter 29:
The Scene of the Crime

"QIN WU?!" Hongjun cried out in shock. It was the young man he'd met earlier that day, wearing a set of iron armor.

As Hongjun sprinted away to call the others, Qin Wu sank to the ground, sobbing and twitching as he stared up at the statue of Acalanatha set on the entrance hall's altar. The Immovable Wisdom King stared furiously down at him beneath the moonlight, raising his spiritual artifacts high with all six arms in a display of divine might.

There was a flurry of footsteps, and Hongjun rushed back out with Li Jinglong. Li Jinglong took a single look at Qin Wu and asked Hongjun, "Have you washed away the bloodstains outside?"

A-Tai, Mergen, and Qiu Yongsi were just behind them. A-Tai stuck his head out the door, then ran outside in his pajamas. Water streamed from one of his rings, twisting up into a cyclone that swept across the street to wash away the traces of blood Qin Wu had left behind in his flight. A-Tai turned out of the alley and erased the trail on the main road too.

"Fetch some water and rinse him off," Li Jinglong instructed the others. "Hongjun, prepare some pacifying incense, quick!"

They stripped Qin Wu out of his armor and laid him down in the courtyard. His lips quivered without cease, and he stank of blood. Mergen spoke up quietly beside them: "Allow me."

Just as he had done when he drove away Hongjun's nightmares the other night, Mergen put a hand on Qin Wu's forehead, and the man calmed down enough to speak.

"I… I killed them." Qin Wu's voice shook.

"Killed whom? How many people?" Li Jinglong asked. "Go turn yourself in first thing in the morning. Xiao-Wu, debtors must discharge their debts, and murderers must pay with their lives! As a man of character, you must own up to your actions."

Qin Wu's face twisted. He said through his sobs, "I went to the Zheng residence to get revenge, but Zheng Wenbin and my stepmother were, were… Then I killed them… Him, his entire family…and my stepmother… I killed them all."

"His family?!" Li Jinglong cried. "Qin Wu! Are you mad?!"

"Help me, help me…" Qin Wu sobbed, gripping Li Jinglong's hand.

Hongjun was frozen in shock. Yet as he thought back to the heavy atmosphere he had felt from Qin Wu during the day and the way he had been polishing his sword, it seemed all the signs had been there.

"Someone was pulling on my hand." Doubled over in agony, Qin Wu continued to clutch at Li Jinglong as if he was the single thread left dangling above

an abyss. “I didn’t want to kill that child,” he wailed, “I didn’t want to! I just wanted to teach my stepmother and Zheng Wenbin a lesson, just those two…”

Li Jinglong shook off Qin Wu’s grip and took a few steps back, breathless with rage. When Hongjun looked up at him, he saw tears welling in Li Jinglong’s eyes.

A-Tai returned from washing away the bloodstains outside. “Let’s clean up in here too.” With a wave of his fan, water vapor exploded outward, drenching everyone with mist.

“Cut that out!” Li Jinglong snapped.

Yelled at for no reason, A-Tai retorted, “No good deed goes unpunished! If you don’t want to clean up, then fine. Why do you have to be so snippy?”

“Surrender yourself first thing in the morning, or I’ll arrest you and take you there myself,” Li Jinglong said to Qin Wu. He looked at the others. “Take turns watching him. Hongjun, give him some pacifying incense, but not too much.”

With that, he retreated to his room and slammed the door.

“Who *is* this guy?” Qiu Yongsi asked.

Hongjun was uneasy. Qin Wu seemed incredibly important to Li Jinglong. “I don’t know,” he answered listlessly.

Mergen sent the others back to bed; he would keep watch for the night. On his way, Hongjun went to knock on Li Jinglong’s door.

“Chief,” he called. There was no response. After a moment, Hongjun gave up and returned to his own room.

When everyone emerged the next morning, Li Jinglong had recovered his usual composure, but Qin Wu was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s gone,” Mergen said. “I accompanied him to the gates of the Court of Judicial Review this morning. He didn’t come back out.”

Li Jinglong closed his eyes and sighed. “Many things are simply written by fate. Back to work, everyone.”

After breakfast, Li Jinglong was preparing to assign his subordinates tasks when Lian Hao arrived with yet another stack of scrolls. Li Jinglong had no choice but to send Mergen to go rest while A-Tai, Qiu Yongsi, and Hongjun filtered through the new cases. As for Li Jinglong, he intended to investigate on his own today.

He’d barely crossed the threshold when Hongjun followed him outside. Li Jinglong turned to look at him. “Go back.”

“They told me to go with you,” Hongjun insisted.

Li Jinglong paused. Then he silently continued on his way, with Hongjun following in his footsteps. Eventually, he sighed. “We need to buy some horses. It’s inconvenient going everywhere on foot.”

They walked down one street after another. Before last night, Hongjun had never seen an ordinary human with such intense malign energy—when Qin Wu had run inside covered in blood, he had felt no different from a yao that had killed hundreds of people. Hongjun found Qin Wu pitiable, but he didn't like how much Li Jinglong cared for him. The man had clearly wronged Li Jinglong, yet Li Jinglong was still so sad on his account.

Hongjun felt as if there were two carp yao arguing inside him. One angrily said, *That's my chief. How could he have been so close with someone else in the past—and more importantly, someone who makes him so sad?!*

The other carp yao scolded, *Qin Wu has it so hard already. Now you hate him too?*

The first carp yao railed, *Why is this happening to me?! Tell me—what do his problems have to do with me? If Chong Ming brings another kid home someday, am I going to get my dad stolen from me too?!*

Hongjun walked behind Li Jinglong, stewing in this dilemma. As they passed through a little alley, Li Jinglong asked, "Want some noodles?"

"Yes please." Now Hongjun was smiling again.

Li Jinglong felt his mood lifting too. "There, you're finally smiling. Why are you so unhappy this morning?"

"You were upset," Hongjun answered honestly, "so I couldn't be happy either."

Li Jinglong told Hongjun to take a seat while he went to order. The emperor had rewarded them handsomely after the imperial examinations case, so they had money to eat whatever they wanted. But even the noodles couldn't dispel Li Jinglong's low spirits. "I tried to talk to him yesterday, but you can't change a person's mind about things like this. They have to figure it out for themselves."

"He killed people," Hongjun said. "And the first person he thought of afterward was you. That proves…umm…"

Through observing Li Jinglong, he had gradually learned how to use tact. He left the rest of the thought unsaid.

Li Jinglong shot him a glance, as if in realization, and his frown softened. Hongjun looked back at him, confused.

"Never mind," said Li Jinglong.

They ate their breakfast in this strange atmosphere. "Don't eat too much," Li Jinglong cautioned. "You're only allowed one bowl today."

But Hongjun insisted, and Li Jinglong couldn't out-stubborn him. He had no choice but to get him a second bowl.

"I can pay for myself," Hongjun said.

"It's not an issue of money," Li Jinglong said. "Your chief has plenty. I could hire the cook and have them make you noodles every day. I'm just afraid you'll…"

"Afraid I'll what?" Hongjun asked. "Don't underestimate my stomach."

“Okay, okay,” Li Jinglong said. “Eat your fill.”

This noodle stall was a famous shop with fifty years of history. They only made ten servings a day of their specialty, braised goose noodles: wide noodles coiled in a large bowl, paired with fifty-six-day-old goslings roasted over a fire and braised in a rich stock. The master stock was only changed out once a year; in between, they only topped it up with broth. The goose meat was fragrant and tender, chopped into thin strips with a keen knife, then topped with half a wing. After the stock was ladled over, the dish gave off a tantalizing aroma with its springy, snow-white noodles and golden goose meat.

Hongjun ate two large bowls in a row.

Two hours later, they had finally arrived at the underground morgue below the Court of Judicial Review. They didn’t make it five steps into the room before Hongjun threw it all back up.

“Are you all right?” Li Jinglong asked, concerned.

Hongjun was silent.

Li Jinglong sent the coroner to fetch some water so Hongjun could rinse his mouth. After Hongjun had finished emptying his guts into a basin, Li Jinglong said, “I told you not to eat too much. And I *also* told you not to come in here. Now you see why?”

Hongjun flapped a hand at him. Li Jinglong nudged him toward the door, but Hongjun protested, “I’ll be fine once I th-throw up again.”

Supporting him with one arm, Li Jinglong took out a cake of fragrance with his other hand and held it before Hongjun’s nose as he guided Hongjun forward.

His first sight of the morgue had already seared itself into Hongjun’s memory —the headless woman from the case Mergen investigated last night; the patient who had been bled to death by the barefoot doctor; all the victims of the recent spate of unnatural deaths, sent here for the coroner to verify the cause before their families could claim the bodies.

Li Jinglong propped Hongjun up and tried to cover his eyes. Hongjun waved him off, so Li Jinglong switched tactics, putting his left arm around Hongjun’s shoulders to hold the perfume over his mouth and nose while he lifted the bloodstained canvas with his free hand.

Below, he found the cadaver of a foreigner covered in wounds. The man had been dead for some time, and his blood had long run dry.

“These long slashes were made by a blade,” Li Jinglong said.

“Oh.” Hongjun was already beginning to recover. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen dead people on the way to Chang’an—he had merely been momentarily overwhelmed by the stench of decay. He reassured Li Jinglong that he was fine—he could continue.

Li Jinglong lifted the canvas sheets one by one to examine the bodies. “All these people were killed by weapons, not monsters.”

Hongjun frowned. Li Jinglong glanced at another of the bodies. “This was a suicide. The wound is clean, and it takes an unusual angle, directly toward the heart.” He picked up the corpse’s hand and twisted it into the pose someone would take to stab themselves in the chest. “Not a monster,” Li Jinglong concluded, and went to examine the next body.

Bending, Hongjun studied the dead man’s expression. Understanding seemed to dawn on him.

“Don’t touch it,” Li Jinglong said. “You’re not wearing gloves.”

Hongjun drew closer to more carefully examine the cadaver’s face.

“What are you doing?” Li Jinglong asked, removing one glove and handing it to Hongjun.

The silk glove was still warm from his hand. Hongjun put it on, leaned in, and ran a hand down the corpse’s face. After being dead for a day and a night, the body was stiff.

“Look,” Hongjun said. He tilted the body’s head toward Li Jinglong and lifted its eyelids. Li Jinglong saw a face with its eyes wide open in terror. Hongjun had seen this expression just last night—on Qin Wu’s twisted, ferocious face as he charged into the Department of Exorcism.

Li Jinglong frowned and pondered for a moment. “He saw something terrifying.”

“I chased Fei’ao into Chang’an because I was woken by screams outside the city,” Hongjun said. “When I found where they were coming from, I saw the bodies of people who were bitten to death…”

“They had the same expressions?” Li Jinglong asked.

Li Jinglong joined Hongjun to study the corpse’s face. Had Hongjun not mentioned it, Li Jinglong would have missed this connection entirely. Whether a person died peacefully or with regrets, their final expression was often frozen on their face in death. Li Jinglong knew this well enough, but he hadn’t seen many people mauled to death by monsters. He had walked past without noticing anything strange.

“If he killed himself,” Hongjun said, “why was he so afraid before he died?”

“He might still be afraid—but it would be a different kind of fear,” Li Jinglong said. “Let’s keep looking.”

Hongjun closed the man’s eyes and recited a quiet prayer: “May you head to the land of bliss and not fall into hell.” He followed Li Jinglong as he examined the rest of the bodies before leaving the Court of Judicial Review.

“Let’s go to the Zheng house,” Li Jinglong said, thinking through what they had discovered thus far. He borrowed a horse from the Court of Judicial Review, but when they exited the gate, they ran across Hu Sheng and Huang Yong conversing just outside.

As Li Jinglong led the horse over to them, Hu Sheng took a deep breath. “Do you remember Qin Wu?”

“I already know,” Li Jinglong said, expression placid.

Huang Yong was shocked. “Chief Li, how did you find out?”

“Acalanatha told me,” Li Jinglong said with a polite nod.

“Jinglong,” Hu Sheng said, “can’t you beg for mercy from His Majesty and Chancellor Yang on his behalf?”

Li Jinglong swung up astride the horse. “He should bear the consequences of his own rash actions. Hongjun, let’s go.”

Hongjun mounted the horse behind Li Jinglong. The chief snapped the reins, and they galloped away from the Court of Judicial Review. Hongjun didn’t dare comment as they rode toward the scene of the crime.

When they reached the Zheng family’s home, Li Jinglong thought for a moment before dismounting to enter.

Yang Guozhong’s housekeeper, as well as the vice captain of the Longwu Guard, Wen Xiao, and various representatives from the Court of Judicial Review and the Ministry of Justice were present at the scene. All of them knew Li Jinglong was favored by the emperor at the moment, and nodded respectfully to him when he arrived.

It was a terrible sight to behold. The room was splashed with blood, streaks of red dragging across the floor toward the doors. The suffering and despair of the victims as they tried to flee was plain to see.

“This trail of blood is from Zheng Wenbin’s elderly mother,” Wen Xiao said grimly. “She was nearly seventy. Xiao-Wu stabbed her in the chest, then chased after her and finished her off when she tried to run.”

“I’m afraid some of our brothers who don’t know the details of the case won’t be able to resist speaking up on Xiao-Wu’s behalf,” Li Jinglong said.

Wen Xiao sighed and walked Li Jinglong out the door. After a scandal like this, every member of the Longwu Guard, from Hu Sheng downward, would be held accountable; none of them would get off scot-free.

“Public resentment against the Yang Family is at an all-time high,” Wen Xiao said. “The Shenwu Guard and the Yulin Guard have both run up against them and suffered beatings and punishments. All six divisions of the imperial guard are restless, and given the recent reduction in military salaries, it’s only going to get worse. I’m afraid someone will use Xiao-Wu as a pretext to start trouble.”

Li Jinglong was about to reply when he realized Hongjun was still inside. “Hongjun?!”

Hongjun stood quietly inside the room. The malevolent energy released by the family as they died was so thick it was nearly impossible to disperse. He recited a few incantations under his breath to pacify the souls of the dead, with no effect.

He jumped as a hand caught his wrist from behind—Li Jinglong was tugging him away, telling him to stop looking.

“There’s so much malign energy in this blood,” Hongjun said.

Outside, Li Jinglong mounted the horse and pulled Hongjun up behind him again before setting off down the street. “Hongjun, promise me something.”

“What?”

“No matter where or when, no matter what happens, if you’re ever so angry you can’t control yourself, think of me first,” Li Jinglong said firmly. “If a fleeting impulse leads to this sort of tragedy, you won’t be the only one who suffers.”

“I won’t lose control,” Hongjun said. “I’m not him.”

“You’re a good kid.” Li Jinglong’s tone was casual. “But an exorcist’s strength is far beyond an ordinary human’s, and you’re bound to be misunderstood in the course of fighting monsters.”

Hongjun figured that much was true. But he would never take leave of his senses like Qin Wu had or do something like slaughter an entire household.

Their third stop was the home of the blacksmith who had murdered his wife. Blood was splattered over all four walls in another gruesome tableau. One couch was completely soaked in red, and bloody handprints smeared the walls. Hongjun had encountered more malign energy today than ever before in his life, leaving him somber and uncomfortable in the extreme.

Just as Li Jinglong was about to send Hongjun outside so he could examine the room on his own, Hongjun spotted something in a corner. “What’s that?”

Li Jinglong bent and picked up a piece of dark iron shaped like a half-moon. “This is a blacksmith’s house, so it must have come from a set of armor or something,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun took the little disc from him and stroked its sharp edge.

“What?” Li Jinglong asked. “Is there something strange about it?” Hongjun squinted, examining the object under the sunlight. “Put it away,” Li Jinglong suggested. “We can examine it in more detail when we return to headquarters.”

The last stop on their itinerary was Pinghe Ridge, outside the city walls. Their destination lay in the middle of a large, grassy plain, and by the time they reached it, it was already dusk. Hongjun stretched his arms overhead as he and Li Jinglong walked down the road to examine the crime scene.

Before long, Li Jinglong found the remnants of a bonfire. “They set up camp here. They must have planned to enter Chang’an the next day.”

“Was any of their merchandise stolen?” Hongjun asked.

Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun with a smile in his eyes. “It’s all still here. This wasn’t a violent robbery. You’re becoming more like a real exorcist every day.”

“Actually, I was just wondering if there’s anything to eat…”

Clearing his throat, Li Jinglong got back to business. “The assailant stabbed one person to death right here.” Li Jinglong pointed at a bloodstain in the grass. “They slit another person’s throat…here.” He turned toward another dark stain.

“The murderer must have been strong,” Hongjun said. “The victims were all almost as tall as Qiu Yongsi.”

Li Jinglong hummed in assent. “It was probably one of the merchant caravan’s bodyguards. He took out his two fellow bodyguards first, then killed the unarmed merchants as easily as slaughtering lambs.”

“Where did he die?” Hongjun asked.

The crime scene had been disturbed when it had been discovered earlier, so Li Jinglong was unable to determine this by the blood splatter.

After taking a few laps around the scene, Hongjun shouted, “Chief, look!” He was standing behind a large stone, where there was another stain of dark blood. “Someone was hiding here.”

Li Jinglong thought for a moment. “There are no other bloodstains in this area. This didn’t come from a survivor of the attack. Look, the grass isn’t flattened here, and there aren’t any footprints nearby. It doesn’t look like anyone fled this way.”

The two exchanged a glance. Hongjun saw what Li Jinglong was getting at—if it had been a merchant hiding behind the stone, once they were discovered, they would have been dragged out and killed, which would have left some sort of trace. Then…

“Whoever was hiding behind the stone was the murderer who turned on his party—the bodyguard, who returned here and killed himself at the very end.” Li Jinglong slung an arm over Hongjun’s shoulder as they crouched behind the stone and gazed back toward the crime scene. “What was he looking at?”

Shooting to his feet, Hongjun ran over to the bonfire ringed by purplish-black stains and glanced around. Li Jinglong frowned in thought, following at a slower pace. Hongjun turned back to look at Li Jinglong, then down at the ground. They studied the scene together until they found a faint, nearly indiscernible trail of flattened grass winding across the meadow.

Li Jinglong sucked in a breath and followed the trail toward the edge of the clearing, where it disappeared into the trees. Broken branches littered the ground. Looking up, Li Jinglong said, “Whether human or yaoguai, something hid in the trees here that night observing the merchant party.”

Yet there were no signs of a departure—only that faint trail marking a path from the tree to the bonfire.

“Did they fly here?” Li Jinglong wondered.

“It’s possible,” Hongjun said.

“What types of yaoguai can fly?”

“Lots. I could list them until tomorrow morning without finishing.”

Li Jinglong promptly abandoned this line of inquiry.

Chapter 30:
Underground Pursuit

BY THIS TIME, night was beginning to fall.

"Let's wait here for a while," Li Jinglong suggested. He started a new campfire and dug out some dry rations for Hongjun. Hongjun hadn't had much of an appetite since the morgue. Limp and dispirited, he drank some water from the stream and lay down.

"Thanks for making do," Li Jinglong said. "We've tentatively confirmed that this case involves yao after all. I'll take you guys out for some fun after it's solved."

Hongjun lay on the grass of the meadow and turned his head to look at Li Jinglong. "After I left the mountains, I slept like this every day on my way to Chang'an. I'm used to it. But what makes you think this case involves yao?"

Pensive, Li Jinglong said, "A bodyguard suddenly kills his entire party on the final day of their journey, just outside the city, then commits suicide? It doesn't make any sense."

Hongjun hummed in agreement. "But the yaoguai didn't kill anyone with its own hands. Why was it here?"

"That question may be the key to this case," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun thought and thought, but he couldn't figure it out. Li Jinglong said, "We might have a better idea after we discuss with the others. Think about something happier—where do you like to go for fun?"

"I won't go to Pingkang Ward again," Hongjun said.

"Oh, so you've lost interest after I didn't let you participate last time?"

For some reason, Hongjun recalled his conversation with the carp yao yesterday. Li Jinglong knew what was good to eat and where to go to play, and Hongjun always experienced something new at his side. His life grew more joyful by the day.

Li Jinglong was still looking at him, waiting for his answer. Hongjun pointed up at the autumn sky. "Chief, look how pretty the stars are."

"Mm," Li Jinglong hummed and lay down beside him so they could gaze up at the night sky together. "You know, I don't like Qin Wu like that," he said after a time. "Were you jealous?"

Hongjun's heart started pounding in his chest. He sputtered, "I…I wasn't!"

"When you saw me worrying about him," Li Jinglong said seriously, "you were upset, weren't you?"

Hongjun turned over and stopped responding.

"He and I used to be good friends. It just hurts to see him do this to himself…" Li Jinglong looked up at the sky again and said, half to himself, "I haven't even known you a month, but it's obvious from everything you say and do

that you hail from somewhere beyond the mortal realm. The way you interact with the world is pure and honest. What common man could compare?"

Flowers of joy burst into bloom in Hongjun's chest. He turned back around to look at him. "Really? I'm so happy!"

Li Jinglong chuckled. "As long as you're happy."

Hongjun stifled a yawn; his next words came out slightly slurred. "Sometimes, when I think of Du Hanqing or Xiao-Wu, I can't help but wonder—if I hadn't grown up in Yao…in my household, would I have made even worse choices than they did? The only thing I have going for me is having been born in a better place."

"That's not true," Li Jinglong said. "Every person is born with an innate nature. Some people maintain a solid moral foundation even if they spend their entire lives destitute and struggling. That day, when you said you liked me…"

Hongjun hummed, his eyelids growing heavy. He clearly hadn't heard the last thing Li Jinglong said at all. Li Jinglong was bemused. How could he fall asleep just like that? He shook Hongjun's shoulder and called his name but received no response, so he let him be.

Their campfire burned low, and the meadow sank into darkness.

Hongjun started awake in the dark with a sharp cry. A robe was spread over him; before he could begin to struggle, he felt Li Jinglong reach over and lay a steadying hand on his shoulder. At some point, Li Jinglong had moved over to lie on his back beside him. They were pressed shoulder to shoulder, with Li Jinglong's robe spread across both of them.

"Nightmares again?" Li Jinglong asked. "Why are you always having nightmares?"

Hongjun gasped for breath. "I dreamed of a yaoguai k-killing people."

In his dream, the corpse they had seen that day at the morgue crouched behind the stone, trembling. A dark shadow wreathed in fog approached. As it stretched out its hand, the blood splattered across the campsite began to squirm like a living carpet of insects before streaming toward the shadow creature's palm.

"Don't be afraid," Li Jinglong quietly said. "Are you sensitive to resentful energy? I wanted to ask you earlier."

Hongjun mumbled in the affirmative. He could sense the strong heartbeat in Li Jinglong's powerful body, and the dim glow within his meridians drew Hongjun in. He scooted a little closer, feeling his nightmare-disturbed spirit settle as he sank back into sleep.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Before they rode back to Chang'an the next morning, Li Jinglong took another walk around the campsite but noticed nothing new.

When they returned to the Department of Exorcism, they found the other three asleep in their clothes in the main hall, having apparently stayed up through the night reading case files.

“We got another batch of new cases last night,” A-Tai said, rubbing sleep from his bleary eyes. “Another murder case, this one with definite yao involvement. There was a witness too.”

After a moment of consideration, Li Jinglong said, “Set that case aside for now; I want to tell you what we discovered. Hongjun, you do the talking this time.”

“Um?” Hongjun had pretty much forgotten everything already. “I had two bowls of braised goose noodles yesterday…”

“I see how it is!” A-Tai raged. “We were here working ourselves to the bone yesterday, and you went out to feast?”

Realizing any explanation would only make things worse, Li Jinglong snapped, “Get to the point!”

Hongjun recounted their findings to the best of his abilities. When he mentioned how he threw up upon entering the morgue, everyone—the carp yao included—chorused, “Serves you right!” After he described what they’d seen on Pinghe Ridge, everyone frowned in thought and began asking questions.

Li Jinglong took over answering, carefully explaining every detail. Finally, he turned to Hongjun and said, “Haven’t you forgotten something?”

Mergen spoke up before Hongjun could remember what he’d missed. “The first three cases might not involve yao, but the merchants are suspicious for sure.”

“You’re counting Qin Wu too,” Li Jinglong said.

“Could there be some connection between all four cases?” A-Tai muttered.

“Sure—the Imperial Court of Judicial Review couldn’t solve them,” Qiu Yongsi quipped.

Everyone looked at him, unimpressed.

Qiu Yongsi waved a hand and chuckled. “They involve blood.”

“You’re right!” Hongjun said.

“Aside from the doctor who fled the city without leaving us any leads,” Li Jinglong said, now grave, “the other cases are all unusually violent murders, leaving behind grisly crime scenes.”

“That’s not much of a connection,” Mergen said, frowning. “It’s not uncommon for there to be blood at the scene of a murder.”

“All these cases were crimes of passion—there was a point at which the perpetrator lost control,” Li Jinglong continued.

“Anyone can act impulsively in the heat of the moment,” Qiu Yongsi said. “Especially when they’re driven by their inner demons…”

“Inner demons…” Li Jinglong pointed out the words that Qiu Yongsi had chosen.

Everyone sank into silence.

“But doesn’t that only apply to Qin Wu?” Hongjun asked. “We didn’t see the other culprits lose their minds.”

“There was the bodyguard who committed suicide,” Li Jinglong reminded him. Hongjun remembered now—the expression on the man’s face, and the clues he himself had discovered.

“We should visit the blacksmith who killed his wife,” Mergen said. “If his situation is similar to Qin Wu’s, perhaps there’s something there.”

“The blacksmith’s neighbors must have known him, right?” A-Tai asked.

“The file covered it. They said he was a good, honest man.” Li Jinglong handed A-Tai the scroll to look over himself.

At mention of the blacksmith, Hongjun recalled the half-moon-shaped piece of iron he’d found in the man’s house. The iron gave off faint traces of yao energy, but he couldn’t identify the origin. Of the five of them, Qiu Yongsi was the most experienced and well learned; if he could identify the Sword of Wisdom, perhaps he would recognize this too.

Hongjun pulled out the iron disc. “I keep thinking this…”

“Wait!” Qiu Yongsi leaned in and snatched the object. His breathing immediately quickened.

“Is it some kind of spiritual device?” Hongjun asked.

“Not a spiritual device,” Qiu Yongsi muttered. “This is a dragon scale.”

The next afternoon, a guard led the members of the Department of Exorcism and Lian Hao, the registrar from the Court of Judicial Review, down to the deepest prison cells.

“He’s been interrogated already; he confessed to everything. He claims he was possessed when he killed her,” Lian Hao said. He asked the guard to unlock the door and stood aside to let everyone into the cell.

The culprit huddled in a gloomy corner. He was a man in his fifties, his disheveled hair obscuring his face as he shrank into himself, mumbling nonsense. He was clearly no longer lucid.

Li Jinglong touched him lightly on the shoulder, and the blacksmith started screaming. “A ghost! A ghost!”

Mergen went down on one knee in front of the man, examining his face. “What did you see? Don’t be afraid. Tell us.”

The man trembled, face twitching and twisting as his throat worked, but he said nothing more. Li Jinglong frowned and glanced at Hongjun. Both recalled the cadaver of the bodyguard who had killed his entire merchant party—specifically, the expression on his face.

“A ghost, a ghost…” the blacksmith repeated, muttering that one phrase over and over.

As they left the prison, Hongjun glanced back toward the blacksmith and found that Qin Wu was being held in a neighboring cell. He was dressed in the coarse white uniform of a prisoner on death row, his wrists and ankles shackled as he slept on the straw-strewn floor.

At a gesture from Hongjun, the guard opened the lock on his cell with a clang of metal. Hongjun stepped inside and shook Qin Wu awake. Qin Wu sprang up like a bird startled by the twang of a bow, his hand latching onto Hongjun's wrist.

"Help me…help me…" His voice trembled as he spoke. "I shouldn't have done it… I was wrong…"

Hongjun frowned. "Xiao-Wu, tell me, what happened that night?"

Qin Wu's eyes were filled with terror; he was on the verge of tears. "I don't know… I don't know… There was a shadow; it kept following me… I didn't want to do it… Help me…"

Outside the cell, everyone's eyes went sharp. Li Jinglong walked in, knelt down in front of Qin Wu, and studied his face. "Explain."

"After I killed them, a shadow, it came inside…" Qin Wu said shakily.

Hongjun started in alarm. Li Jinglong asked, "What did this shadow look like?"

Qin Wu shook his head. "I don't know, I didn't get a good look, I ran, I was too scared to stay there any longer…"

That night, Qin Wu explained, he had yet to recover from his bloodthirsty fit when he felt a chilly breeze blow through the house. All around him, the pools of blood seemed to come to life, congealing into a carpet of crawling insects. His hot madness was immediately doused by fear—he had grabbed his sword and stumbled his way to the Department of Exorcism.

"Likely a hallucination," Lian Hao said with a frown. "Many murderers become confused after killing. Those who remain calm are much rarer."

Hongjun recalled the steady young man he had met the other day. He had no way to reconcile that Qin Wu with the panicked murderer before them now.

Later that night, under the bright light of the waxing moon, the exorcists paused at the foot of Jiuqu Bridge in silent contemplation.

Hongjun flipped the dragon scale back and forth across his knuckles, from his pointer to middle to ring finger, then back again.

"Don't cut yourself," Mergen warned.

"A dragon?" Li Jinglong wondered. "But why would a dragon provoke this blacksmith and Qin Wu into killing people? What's its motive?"

"It must be part of some dark art," Qiu Yongsi said. "What Hongjun has is a dragon-type scale, but the dragon has nine sons, each with unique characteristics. It's unlikely to have come from a true dragon."

Hongjun hummed. "Dragon scales and phoenix feathers are brimming with the power of whatever spiritual beast shed them. This scale might come from a member of the dragon family, but it's definitely not from a true dragon."

There was a splash by their feet as the carp yao pulled himself out of the Jiuqu River. "It's too murky down there; I couldn't see anything. But on the far side

of Jinchi Lake, I found signs of something large crawling across the ground. Whatever it was displaced a lot of stones on the shore."

Even after cultivating into dragons, most members of the aquatic yao races still needed access to sources of water. Some, like the carp yao, who weren't particularly advanced in their cultivation, needed to soak in pools of water on a regular basis. Li Jinglong's hypothesis had just been proven correct: There were hints that aquatic yao were present in Chang'an.

The waterways in this region had a long history: The city of Haojing, located not far from Chang'an, had been the nation's capital during the Western Zhou dynasty nearly two millennia ago, and the eight rivers encircling Chang'an were a famous landmark even during the Han dynasty. The Jing and Wei Rivers flowed past the thousand-year-old city, their tributaries and offshoots forming a dense network of passageways. In places like Shanglin Park, the imperial hunting grounds just outside the city, the waters ran nearly ten feet deep. If aquatic yao were present in the area, they would leave traces of their movements at the entrances to canals, in riverbeds, and on fences near the water.

"Split up and investigate all the waterways in Chang'an," Li Jinglong said. "Report back if you discover anything abnormal."

Everyone dispersed to the far corners of the city. Hongjun and the carp yao crossed Lishui Bridge and headed west through the quiet of the city after curfew, the silence disturbed only by the chatter of a boy and his yao as they traveled the dim alleyways.

"Some yao are born as dragons, while others have to cultivate for thousands of years to become one," the carp yao remarked. "Isn't that unfair?"

Holding his pentacolor sacred light aloft to illuminate their surroundings, Hongjun said, "I think carp are unfair. They have no relationship to the dragon race, yet they can still become dragons just by leaping over the Dragon Gate."

"If only," the carp yao said. "Those stories are written by ignorant frauds. They're full of lies, you understand me? You have to collect merits first; only after you've gained enough merits can you become a dragon by leaping over the Dragon Gate."

"Shhh," Hongjun said. He stood outside a canal tunnel at the western edge of the city and raised the sacred light to peer further inside. Water dripped from the ceiling, and the carp yao scurried to hide behind Hongjun.

The Lishui River dove underground here, flowing under the city walls to join the moat outside Chang'an. The city wall here was only a century old, constructed by General Qin Qiong while Emperor Li Shimin was in power. Built at the base of a hill, the canal had once been part of a hydraulic engineering project to irrigate the land both within and without the city walls—in times of drought, the Jing River outside the city would be redirected toward Chang'an, and in times of flood, excess water would drain into the Wei River to be dispersed toward the Wei River Basin. The endeavor had been abandoned after Empress Wu Zetian moved the capital to Luoyang around fifty years ago, and now, with the Ministry of Works neglecting its upkeep, the underground waterways had fallen into disrepair and become clogged with filth. The canal tunnel they stood before now was surrounded by heavy iron

fences; on the ground beyond them, something seemed to sparkle in the night.

The carp yao slipped between the bars and picked it up. Hongjun cried out in surprise. “Another one! Why does it look different?”

Hongjun held up the two iron scales side by side. One was a dark gray, while the other was blue-green. They were clearly from different beasts.

“There’s more than one of them,” Hongjun said, voice grim.

Hongjun tried to raise the iron fence, but it weighed a full ton; he didn’t have the strength. Instead he used a throwing knife to slice through one of the fence posts, holding the broken post as he edged sideways through the gap into the tunnel.

“Hongjun, don’t do anything rash. You don’t have all of your throwing knives. Let me get the others!” the carp yao said.

Exasperated, Hongjun asked, “Aren’t you underestimating me a little?”

There had been a number of bumps along the road, but Hongjun was hardly a novice, even if he seemed so compared to his colleagues in the Department of Exorcism. The carp yao hurried off to find the others, while Hongjun slowly advanced into the dark tunnel.

The tunnel was wide and deep, filled with the constant background noise of dripping water. It was so dark he could scarcely see his own hand in front of him. He heard a creaking sound and felt a breeze from the far end of the tunnel, as if someone had opened a heavy wooden door.

“Who’s there?” Hongjun yelped.

There was no response. Standing alone in the darkness, Hongjun snapped his fingers. Rays of light scattered in all directions, the spiritual technique forming the hazy image of a phoenix in flight as crackling flames flew toward the walls like tiny meteors and lit the torches along the walls one by one.

There was another creak. Following the source of the sound, Hongjun turned a corner and found himself in an expansive subterranean chamber where a number of broken-down warships seemed to have been discarded. The river’s current streamed down a drop and turned the blades of a rotting waterwheel; at every half rotation, the wheel made the creaking sound he’d heard.

He was about to turn back when a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind. A sinister voice said into his ear, “Hai mie hou bi…”

Hongjun jumped and nearly chopped off A-Tai’s hand with his knife; A-Tai immediately shushed him. Apparently, the carp yao had found A-Tai first, as he was closest; the others had yet to arrive.

“What does that even mean?” Hongjun asked, his heart still racing.

“‘Hello, my darling Hongjun’ in Persian.” A-Tai waved his jeweled fan with a self-possessed smile.

“You made that last part up, didn’t you?” said Hongjun, blank-faced. He tossed the new dragon scale to A-Tai, who gestured toward the ground, then waved his fan. One of his rings released a handful of flames, illuminating the quiet underground riverbank.

Several trails of footprints meandered along the bank. Hongjun and A-Tai examined them, then looked up at the calm surface of the water.

“Maybe they’re hiding underwater,” A-Tai whispered. “Should we bet on it?”

Hongjun whispered back, “I think the monster might not be home.”

A-Tai raised a quizzical brow. Hongjun explained, “All the murders in the last several days have happened at night, right?”

“Smart.” A-Tai chuckled. Without warning, he brandished his fan and sent the water of the underground canal flying into the air.

Hongjun yelped, “It was only a guess!”

A-Tai wielded his cyclone fan at full power. With a great roar, all the water in the channel was swept into an enormous vortex, which collapsed as quickly as it’d spun up. Every wall became a crashing waterfall.

“You guessed right, little darling. They’re not home,” A-Tai said cheerfully. “Should we each take a side? You can pick first.”

Hongjun turned to investigate one side of the tunnel, leaving the other to A-Tai. The decaying warships lay scattered across the riverbed, and he carefully picked his way across the deck of one vessel.

“A-Tai!” Hongjun called. “Come take a look at this.”

A-Tai leapt across the prows of a few ships and landed beside Hongjun. An array of sigils was carved into the deck of the ship. In its center was a copper dish holding a drop of some strange, bloodred liquid, squirming in place.

The two exchanged a glance, then moved forward to examine the array in more detail.

“This looks like a makeshift altar.” A-Tai frowned. “Is it for sacrificial offerings? What does the array do?”

“Where’s everyone else? Why aren’t they here yet?” Hongjun asked.

Sensing something was off, A-Tai said, “Let’s take that thing and go.”

He motioned for Hongjun to hold the copper dish while he pulled out a tiny glass bottle, unplugged the stopper, and angled it to collect the droplet of blood. The instant he did, the droplet seemed to come alive, spreading itself into a thin membrane before launching at their faces.

“Watch out!” A-Tai shouted. Before Hongjun could react, A-Tai waved his fan, unleashing a cyclone that propelled both of them away from the array. The droplet shot into the river, which turned crimson and surged toward the two of them in a great wave.

“What is that thing?!” Hongjun shouted.

“Get out of here! Go get help!” A-Tai waved his fan with all his might, trying to throw Hongjun past the looming wall of blood, when a shrouded figure appeared at the entrance of the tunnel and blocked Hongjun’s path. The sea of blood descended upon them. As Hongjun flew through the air on A-Tai’s cyclone, the figure charged toward him, cloak flapping to reveal a ferocious face—Yazi. The

yaoguai's face was corded with bulging tendons, and he bared his claws and fangs as he threw himself at Hongjun.

"A-Tai!" Hongjun cried, but A-Tai had already been swallowed by the tidal wave of blood.

A throwing knife flew from each of Hongjun's hands, blocking Yazi's claws with a *clang*. Yazi opened his jaws, his eyes like copper bells flashing with light. Hongjun faced him fearlessly. A ripple ran through his body; in the next moment, his pentacolor sacred light exploded outward, slamming into Yazi, who was taken completely by surprise. The creature was sent flying backward into a rotting ship, crashing through its mast and plummeting into the sea of blood.

Hongjun's sacred light was the strongest defensive spiritual device in existence—it could block flying sand, raging fire, frigid ice, or furious lightning—but it had limited offensive capabilities. Without all of his throwing knives, he would be no match for the creature if he pursued him, but he could at least fend the yaoguai off.

"A-Tai!" Hongjun shouted.

Another cyclone spun to life and split the tidal wave of blood. Ice shot in all directions, joined by fire and bolts of lightning. A-Tai was clearly struggling to fend off the sea of blood. It was a shapeless thing composed entirely of waves, and his cyclone fan could only beat back one side at a time. As A-Tai leapt between the decks of the ships, an enormous swell caught up to him and nearly knocked him into the churning tide.

The sea of blood rose higher and higher, and A-Tai was already out of breath. With nowhere else to go, he perched on top of a crumbling ship—a lonely island in an ocean of red—close to falling apart entirely.

Quick as lightning, Hongjun tossed out his grappling hook and secured it on an outcrop near the top of the cave. Gripping the rope in one hand, he sprinted up the curving walls of the underground canal before launching himself toward the center, reaching his other hand toward A-Tai. "Grab on!"

The raging sea of blood rushed toward A-Tai from all sides. A-Tai let out a furious roar, spun in place, and summoned a blast of wind to twist the wave that was about to swallow him into a whirlpool. He flipped backward and sent a cyclone spinning toward the ship he'd been standing on, using the gust to boost himself up into the air.

The ship splintered in the gale as Hongjun grabbed A-Tai one-handed. A-Tai brandished his fan, sweeping it backward and shooting the two of them toward the entrance like an arrow loosed from the bowstring. The sea of blood swallowed the chamber, surging up the tunnel walls before crashing back down on them from above. With a flick of his left hand, Hongjun summoned his sacred light to form a wall. The blood sea slammed into his barrier, unable to force its way through.

Hongjun rotated both wrists and pushed his barrier forward. Panting for breath, A-Tai cried, "Nice one!"

The sea of blood retreated again and again under Hongjun's advance, until finally, the thundering tidal wave collapsed—Hongjun's sacred light had stopped it

in its tracks.

A grotesque beast emerged from the water and slammed into the barrier. Yazi had at last revealed his true form, but he couldn't break through Hongjun's shield. It was as if the cavern had become an enormous, macabre fishbowl: A barrier of light, dozens of feet across, blocked several tons of bloodstained river water while an enormous, hideous yaoguai thrashed against its confines.

"How long can you hold it?" A-Tai asked.

"If you mean the technique…I can hold it until tomorrow morning," Hongjun said. "But my arms will get tired."

"When I say drop it, drop it," A-Tai said. "Then, turn and run. When I say stop, you stop and use the spiritual device to block it again."

"Okay," Hongjun said. "Be careful."

Yazi charged, crashing heavily against the translucent screen of light, which flashed brighter as it threw him backward again.

"Drop it!" A-Tai yelled.

Hongjun lowered the barrier; the bloodred water crashed down on them like an avalanche. A-Tai spread his arms, leapt backward, and yelled, "Run!"

Hongjun broke into a sprint as A-Tai sailed through the air, one of the rings on his left hand shooting out a steady stream of fireballs. With a flick of the fan in his right, the fireballs hurtled toward the sea of blood.

In that same moment, Yazi burst out of the wall of water with a roar.

"Stop!" A-Tai yelled.

Hongjun looked up and found himself staring into the yaoguai's gaping maw, but instead of biting down on flesh, Yazi's jaws snapped shut around dozens of scorching fireballs from A-Tai's fan. Hongjun ducked forward and thrust out his palms; the sacred light rose to form a barrier again.

With a dull thud like the sound of a person dashing their head against a wall, A-Tai's fireballs exploded inside Yazi's stomach, tearing a bloody hole from the inside out. The sea of blood behind Yazi turned a dark, murky color as he crashed into the sacred light and ricocheted backward into the waves.

Hongjun burst out laughing at the sight, which he found hysterical, but A-Tai only took a few gasping breaths. "Let's get out of here."

Pressing the sacred light forward, Hongjun sealed off the tunnel and blocked the surging sea of blood. The creature was nowhere to be seen; oddly, the blood-stained water also started to calm. They took a few steps back. The crimson of the water had begun to fade at the edges, leaving a streak of red that writhed as if alive.

Recalling the squirming blood droplet on the dish earlier, Hongjun tried lowering the barrier. The foul water that had been encroaching on them splashed harmlessly to the ground and drained away. The injured yaoguai must have fled; all that remained was a small pool of fresh blood squirming weakly on the damp ground.

Hongjun frowned and turned, meeting A-Tai's eyes.

Chapter 31:
Ambush

"CHIEF—"

"Chief?"

Hongjun and A-Tai hurried into the Department of Exorcism, but the carp yao and the others were nowhere to be found. Hongjun was baffled. A sphere of his sacred light hovered in his hand with the blood droplet trapped inside. He frowned in thought. "Where is everyone?"

They waited a while, but Li Jinglong, Mergen, and Qiu Yongsi failed to appear—as did the carp yao, who'd gone to find them.

"Let's go out and look for them," A-Tai suggested.

By now, they were certain something must have happened. Hongjun and A-Tai retraced their steps to Jiuqu Bridge where everyone had first split up and followed the river to its end. They searched until dawn without finding any sign of the others. When they returned to the Department of Exorcism, Hongjun could scarcely keep his eyes open. He curled up to sleep while A-Tai stayed up in case the others returned.

By the time Hongjun woke, it was midday.

"They're still not back," A-Tai muttered. "More than one trap was set for us last night."

Hongjun was fully in a panic now. "They were all ambushed by yaoguai?!"

"It's very likely," A-Tai said, pensive. "Even you and I barely escaped that yao's technique."

Hongjun frowned, holding up the blood droplet they'd recovered from the tunnel last night. It was still wriggling inside his sacred light.

"This is bad," Hongjun said. "We have to find them. What do we do?"

"Don't panic," A-Tai said. "The chief has a boss, doesn't he? Should we try talking to his superior?"

"Yang Guozhong," Hongjun said. "But we haven't found the yao king yet—what if *he*'s the yao king hiding at the emperor's side?"

A-Tai was struck by inspiration. "We can test him. If it's him, maybe he'll lead us into a trap, and we can use that opportunity to save the others."

Yet when Hongjun accompanied A-Tai to the chancellor's estate, they were told that the Right Chancellor had gone to Guanxi and was not currently in Chang'an. Hongjun suggested asking the Court of Judicial Review for help, but A-Tai had doubts about involving ordinary mortals. After all, if they'd stumbled upon something even the exorcists couldn't handle, sending anyone else would be no different from leading lambs to the slaughter. There was no point.

"What now?" Hongjun asked as they left the chancellor's estate.

A-Tai had nothing. They were both out of ideas.

The two stared at each other for a moment. Finally, A-Tai said, “Let’s keep looking. If we can find another of the traps, maybe it’ll give us somewhere to start.”

“Should we split up?” Hongjun asked.

A-Tai agreed. They decided no matter what they found, they wouldn’t act unless absolutely necessary. Instead, they would return to the Department of Exorcism to regroup before making their next move—and whether they discovered anything or not, they would both return by the time the evening drum began to sound.

Hongjun followed the river for the third time but again found nothing.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. That afternoon, Hongjun walked down the streets on the west side of Chang’an. He was surrounded by the bustle of the noisy market, yet he felt a tendril of fear slide up his spine. Even in broad daylight on this busy street, it felt as if countless pairs of eyes watched his every move—as if everything he did played right into the enemy’s hands.

At this thought, Hongjun felt a fresh surge of unease, and his feet unconsciously carried him back toward the Department of Exorcism. His new home, where Acalanatha sat atop his altar, felt like the safest place in the city.

“A-Tai? Chief? Is anyone here?” Hongjun called as he pushed open the door.

A-Tai had yet to return. By now, Li Jinglong and the others had been missing for nearly sixteen hours. Even Zhao Zilong had disappeared.

Hongjun had never felt so frightened. Li Jinglong didn’t know any spiritual techniques. If the yao king were to seek revenge for all the fox yao they had burned to death, the consequences didn’t bear thinking about.

What to do? Hongjun paced back and forth across the courtyard, on the verge of going mad; this mess was far beyond what he could handle.

No—he had to calm down. Hongjun let out a long exhale. If the chief was here, what would he do? Blindly searching the city would get him nowhere. As the sun sank toward the west, Hongjun sat cross-legged in front of the table and began to put together the clues they had collected.

“They were definitely captured,” Hongjun said to himself. “Otherwise, they’d be back by now.”

If Li Jinglong, Mergen, and Qiu Yongsi had stepped into the same kind of trap he had in the canal, they would have had little chance of defending themselves from the squirming blood droplet without Hongjun’s sacred light to protect them. Li Jinglong’s sword, Mergen’s seven nailhead arrows, and Qiu Yongsi’s mysterious painting technique wouldn’t have much effect against its liquid assault. And if they had then been attacked by a creature like the one that had been lying in wait for Hongjun and A-Tai, they were likely captured and injured, or even dead…

A shudder ran through Hongjun’s body. He wrenched his thoughts away from that possibility. If Li Jinglong were here, what would he say?

“Does the yao king have any reason to kill them immediately?” Hongjun gestured with both hands, asking his own question aloud before mimicking Li Jinglong’s tone as he answered, “No—he would wait. He wants revenge; he wants to take us all out in one fell swoop.”

Perhaps this wasn’t sufficient reason for the yao king to keep them alive—but it was at least enough for Hongjun to convince himself that Li Jinglong couldn’t have been killed just yet.

“And they haven’t gotten me yet,” Hongjun said. “I’m a variable too.”

Considering this question settled, he moved on to the next. “Then, where were they taken? Would the injured yaoguai…know?”

A new thought occurred to Hongjun. The creature was injured—maybe he would go to the yao king. Hongjun leapt to his feet and charged out the door like a gust of wind, only to realize it had grown dark.

A-Tai hadn’t returned either.

Hongjun stood in the doorway. The evening drum must have sounded while he was thinking. There could only be one reason A-Tai hadn’t returned: He had been captured too. Hongjun looked around in silence, realizing he was the only one left.

“No way,” Hongjun muttered to himself. It was strange; now that night had fallen, that sensation of being watched he’d had earlier in the day had disappeared. The night gave yao places to hide—it was their best protection—but it meant that Hongjun was obscured by darkness too.

He scaled the tallest structure in Jincheng Ward and looked down over the city. Chang’an’s homes twinkled with lights, and two red lanterns hung from high rafters near his perch. Dark clouds covered the moon, and the sound of music and laughter drifted on the breeze from somewhere in the distance.

Hongjun carefully made his way back to Jiuqu Bridge. Following the banks of the river, he came to the tunnel they had explored yesterday. The subterranean canal was quiet, the walls still dripping with water. In the glow of his sacred light, he saw that everything in the vast, underground chamber had been ravaged by yesterday’s battle.

He slipped into the water without removing his clothes. Just as he suspected, under the water, there was a wide passage low on one of the tunnel walls. He swam down, following the passage until his lungs were burning. At last, the walls opened up before him, and he kicked up to the surface. As he dragged himself out of the water, he spotted a bloody footprint on the shore.

He had emerged in the moat outside the city walls. The first footprint he saw was followed by another—a trail that led away from the city. The flattened grass was stained with drops of blood, and a few fallen scales glinted beneath the trees clustered at the edge of the moat.

Hongjun drew a throwing knife, his heart pounding in his chest as he followed the trail of footprints and blood. Without the others, his chances of victory against another yaoguai like the one he’d encountered in the tunnel were uncertain

at best.

The footprints led up to a cliff face, where the trail disappeared.

Hongjun stood puzzled. They disappeared? He glanced around. How was that possible?

The moon emerged from a bank of hazy clouds and cast its dim light over the land. The stone of the cliff took on a dark, reflective sheen. Hongjun reversed his grip on his knife and tapped the hilt against the rock, but encountered no resistance. Caught off-balance, he soundlessly fell through what seemed to be a wall of solid stone.

An illusion spell!

Hongjun bit back a yelp, afraid he'd alert some yao lying in wait to ambush him. Behind the false cliff face was another steep tunnel, a hundred or so feet in depth. Before he could summon his sacred light, Hongjun was tumbling down in a cloud of dirt and sand, finally crashing to the ground at the bottom of a cave halfway down the mountain.

"Ow…" Hongjun groaned.

Red light flickered inside the cave. A dark crimson array was carved into the ground, glowing in the dim light. The yaoguai's footprints and the trail of blood led up to it, then vanished—this time, for good.

Hongjun tilted his head and examined the array. The pattern of sigils was identical to the array he had seen in the hideout in the canal. An empty copper dish was placed in its center.

What sort of spiritual technique was this? Where had the creature gone? Last night, A-Tai had called it a trap, but perhaps it wasn't. Maybe their enemy had merely happened to return at the moment they discovered the array, or maybe Hongjun and A-Tai had activated a defense mechanism when they disturbed the blood droplet at the array's center. The droplet was clearly supposed to stay inside the copper dish—if the dish didn't leave the array, maybe he wouldn't be attacked.

Whatever the case, Hongjun didn't fear this array; his own sacred light could block anything. He released the blood droplet he had acquired last night and let it fall into the dish.

"The blood must be some sort of medium." Hongjun scratched his head, frowning in thought. What did it mean that the injured yaoguai fled here? He must have used a spiritual technique to transport himself from this point, as there was no other path and no footprints leading back the way he had come.

"Then, this array…" Dropping to one knee, Hongjun examined it closely, then moved on to the last bloody footprint. There was a mysterious symbol beside it. He placed his hand on the symbol and tried to imbue it with spiritual energy.

The array glowed brighter. The blood in the copper dish burst into a spray of pinprick-sized droplets that crackled like flames as they spattered in all directions. Hongjun poured in more spiritual energy, and the radius of the spray increased; blood surged from the copper dish like a fountain, showering the array. Activated by the blood, the array flashed with blinding light. Hongjun didn't even have time to

blink as the light exploded over him, swallowing him with a droning hum.

There was a second hum, and Hongjun found himself suspended in midair, then suddenly in freefall. By now he was used to swallowing his cries of alarm; he flicked his throwing knives into his hand, prepared to meet any new foes head-on. Yet as he twisted in midair to ready himself for a fight, he froze.

He saw himself. A young man who looked exactly like Hongjun flew toward him with a malicious smile, three identical throwing knives in his hands.

Hongjun was speechless. What was going on?!

He raised a knife to defend himself as he crashed into his doppelganger, but the identical youth dissolved into a mist of scarlet blood. The mist shaped itself into a hand, which snatched the peacock feather from Hongjun's waist.

"Who are you?!" Hongjun yelled, still plummeting toward the ground.

"Hongjun!"

It was Li Jinglong's voice—Hongjun flung out a throwing knife, but it collided with his own sacred light, turned against him by the hand that had stolen the jade feather. Each knife he threw was caught midair and stolen away by tendrils of bloody liquid.

More red loomed below—a sea of blood drew closer and closer, until Hongjun crashed through its crimson surface.

"Hongjun!"

The Duchess of Guo chuckled. "That's the fourth."

Hongjun gasped for breath, struggling to right himself in the bloody waves. Looking up toward the top of the cave, he saw a flashing array and understood—this was the trap! He tried to summon fire to his fingers, but the sticky crimson sea surged up and bound him tight. With a furious roar, the yaoguai he had fought before charged toward him from the shore.

"Stop!" Li Jinglong howled.

Hongjun unleashed his flame technique as Yazi's jaws clamped around his shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound, and he screamed in pain as the yaoguai tossed him ashore. He fought to stand, but found the strength abruptly sapped from his body, as if the spiritual energy in his meridians had disappeared all at once.

The Duchess of Guo loomed over Hongjun, bloodless lips parted around the words of an incantation. Hongjun's body glowed as the energy within him was siphoned away, streaming into the Duchess of Guo's mouth.

"Stop…stop!" Li Jinglong was locked in an iron cage nearby. He rammed the bars with his shoulder, roaring, "Take mine! Don't touch him!"

Hongjun thrashed against the ground, but with the sticky blood congealing on his body, his struggles were futile. His spiritual energy was sucked away by the Duchess of Guo, who didn't bother to hide her delight.

Looking up into that face, Hongjun saw her eyes grow vacuous with pleasure as a terrifying cry of ecstasy tore from her throat. Never before had she taken such pure spiritual energy. Her body trembled in satisfaction as her face contorted into its

true form: that of a malevolent fox yao.

"Go…die, monster!" Hongjun gritted through clenched teeth, shooting off a burst of Samadhi true fire with the last of his strength. The fireball exploded as it hit the Duchess of Guo squarely in the chest. She shrieked and fell backward, and the three monstrosities behind her rushed forward to hold Hongjun down. One grabbed his head and bashed it against the ground.

There was a dull *thud*. Blood oozed from his forehead, and his vision went black.

Chapter 32:
Reversing a Desperate Situation

THE THREE BEASTLY yaoguai, Yazi, Suanni, and Baxia, inched closer and closer to Hongjun's prone form. Scoffing, the duchess reached a hand out from beneath her sleeve to halt them. With a casual flick of her fingers, the iron chains on the ground soared toward Hongjun and wrapped themselves around him, hauling his limp body upright before slamming him against the wall of the cave.

Hongjun let out a groan of pain and slid to the ground, head lolling to the side, half conscious and seeing double.

"One more to go," the Duchess of Guo gently said, "and I'll be able to wipe the entire Department of Exorcism out at once. Or were you still hoping your companions would come save you?"

Li Jinglong's combat robes were torn, and his shoulders and back were a mess of bite wounds. His clothes were soaked with dark blood, but when he looked up again, his eyes were spitting fire. "State your conditions!" he said, his voice a low rasp.

"Conditions?" The Duchess of Guo laughed. "Do you know why I waited to deal with you until today?"

Li Jinglong didn't respond as he cast an anxious glance at Hongjun, crumpled behind the Duchess of Guo. Hongjun slowly lifted his head. His entire body felt weak, like it could fall apart at any moment.

"Because you are completely insignificant," the Duchess of Guo continued, quietly. "You pose no threat to me. You are just an ordinary mortal, Li Jinglong. If you'd minded your own business, you might have died peacefully at a ripe old age."

"Are you the yao…the yao king?" Hongjun's speech was halting.

The Duchess of Guo turned to study him. She said blithely, "I am."

"The fox yao…were all your subordinates," Hongjun said, agonized.

"So you do remember them." The Duchess of Guo turned and strode toward the sea of blood. "When you burned my clansmen to death, were you prepared to meet your own demise?"

"Yes," Hongjun said quietly as he came to kneel in the corner. He raised his head and looked the Duchess of Guo in the eye. "Do you want to know why? Come here, and I'll tell you."

The Duchess of Guo frowned and slowly approached Hongjun.

"I'm the one who gave the order to kill them," Li Jinglong cut in. "Hongjun had nothing to do with it!"

Li Jinglong guessed Hongjun intended to launch a sneak attack on the Duchess of Guo by releasing all the spiritual energy in his body. But there was no way it would work. He shook his head at Hongjun, trying to dissuade him.

“But why did you do it?” Hongjun said, frowning. “Couldn’t you have just lived your life as the yao king? Why did you have to kill people?”

The Duchess of Guo began to laugh again at his words. “How are you so naive?”

As Hongjun stared her down, a hint of pity rose in his eyes. “You like it here in Chang’an—I understand, because I like it too.” Hongjun’s eyes stung. “But did you really have to do all that to make a life for yourself here?”

Surprise appeared on the Duchess’s face. Of all the people in the world, only Hongjun would ask such a question.

“You’d have to ask Di Renjie about that.” Her eyes filled with malice. “He declared war on the yao race first; he sought to exterminate us!”

“Fox yao are the most similar to humans,” Hongjun said. “You endure the trials of living as yao while tasting the full spectrum of human emotion.”

“It’s true,” the Duchess of Guo said, her voice dull. “These foolish emotions are to blame for everything—if Jinyun hadn’t fallen for that boy and hidden his body under her bed so she could lay him to rest one day, none of this would have happened.”

A jolt ran through Li Jinglong’s body. The cat that fled from the Duchess of Qin’s estate… It had led them to Jinyun’s room and the dried corpse they had discovered under the bed.

“You went to Pingkang Ward! You visited Jinyun!” Li Jinglong’s voice trembled. “The cat saw your true face as a fox yao—that’s why it led us there!”

The Duchess of Guo sighed. “To think that after arguing with Jinyun for so long, it would be a cat that ruined us! What else would you like to know before your death? Go on, ask. I might as well satisfy your curiosity. None of you are living past tonight.”

Li Jinglong looked up at the Duchess of Guo. “What’s in the pool?”

“Blood, of course.” The Duchess of Guo continued, soft and sinister, “It’s the lifeblood of every person I’ve bled dry. Fox yao must consume their victims’ souls to gain the power to take on their likenesses; the lifeblood they drink feeds into this pool. Ever since the disaster with the imperial examination, I’ve been wondering how to lure you here… After all, this is my most useful tool; yet another one of my children.”

She stopped and turned toward the pool. “To keep it filled, I need fresh blood. And you would never let go of even the smallest lead…”

“It’s a transportation array that uses blood as the medium,” Hongjun panted, gazing toward the giant, roiling pool of blood occupying the center of the cave. The transportation array above it gave off a faint glow.

“That’s right.” The Duchess of Guo exhaled softly. “You think you’re so clever—you imagine you can simply follow the clues to my location, as if it’s that easy to uncover my plans. Did you ever stop to think you might be walking right into my trap? Do you really believe Yazi is stupid enough to accidentally leave a scale at the scene of the crime?”

Hongjun was speechless.

"Your cleverness was your downfall," the Duchess of Guo continued, laughing. "Creating this pool was no easy feat, you know. It's mortal blood refined with fox yao energy; it's taken me a full ten years to grow it to this size. Every drop of blood I feed it increases the pool's power to take the forms of the humans whose blood it contains."

"But why can it transform into me?" Hongjun was still shaken by the sight of his doppelganger made of blood.

"You can thank Chief Li's sword for that," the Duchess of Guo said, a smile curling her lips. "He delivered it to us yesterday himself. Do you like the result?"

Hongjun suddenly recalled the blows he and Li Jinglong had exchanged the first time they had met in the Department of Exorcism—he had cut his fingers on Li Jinglong's sword.

"I require the blood of only one more mortal, and my preparations will be complete," she said. "Unfortunately, you won't be around to witness my triumph."

A chill shot up Li Jinglong's spine. "Who do you want it to transform into?"

But Hongjun saw it at once. "That's impossible!" Hongjun cried. "You can't touch the human emperor. He's protected by the Ziwei Star!"

"Indeed," the Duchess of Guo said. "But who says I can't place him under house arrest while an identical emperor takes his place? Who would notice? Aside from my human idiot of a sister, that is."

The air left Li Jinglong's lungs; he gasped for breath.

"Are those all your questions?" the Duchess of Guo asked. "If you have nothing else to say, I'll begin."

Li Jinglong's mind was racing. Before he could speak, the Duchess of Guo preempted him: "Don't bother trying to stall for time, Chief Li. This is an akasha realm I created using an advanced spiritual technique—a pocket in reality. Even if you break out of your cage, without my transportation technique, you'll never leave this blood pool."

She stalked slowly toward Hongjun. Li Jinglong's breathing quickened.

"What are you going to do?" Hongjun's voice trembled.

"Pull out your tendons, flay you alive," the Duchess of Guo said sweetly, "and then cut you to pieces in front of Chief Li here. I'll peel off your scalp first, skin your pretty little face, then drain your blood before I eat your soul and take on your form as I subject the chief and all your comrades to an excruciating death by a thousand cuts. How does that sound?"

Neither Hongjun nor Li Jinglong could muster a response.

For a long moment, the only sound inside the cave was that of their heavy breathing. The Duchess of Guo raised a hand and Hongjun's body rose into the air. "But I have yet to see your spiritual devices. Let's have a look; your knives appear quite sharp. Baxia, bring them here."

Baxia changed into human form and retrieved them, then returned cupping Hongjun's spiritual devices in both hands.

"Should I use this throwing knife, or…" Rifling through the collection, the Duchess of Guo couldn't hide the way her face tensed at the sight of the jade peacock feather. She looked up at Hongjun with an expression of disbelief.

"You… Where did you get this spiritual device?" she demanded, her voice shaking. "Are you… No, that's not possible… Are you from Yaojin Palace?!"

Hongjun stared at the Duchess of Guo, unblinking. "Touch a hair on my head," he said softly, "and my dad will burn you to ash!"

The Duchess of Guo let out a shrill peal of laughter. "Do you really think someone like *me* would be afraid of *him*?! He's nothing more than a defeated opponent of mine. Perhaps I'll send your bones up the Taihang Mountains and see how he responds."

She picked up a throwing knife and pinned Hongjun with a cool gaze.

"Stop!" Li Jinglong shouted. "Duchess!"

She sighed and closed her eyes. "What else do you have to say? You're not getting out of this, Li Jinglong—none of you are. You cannot convince a mother to forgive the murderers who killed her children."

"It was all me," Li Jinglong pleaded. "Clearly you have some connection with Hongjun's father—wouldn't it be better to have Hongjun sniff some oblivion pollen and forget all this?"

The Duchess of Guo turned to look at Li Jinglong.

"I don't know the history between you," Li Jinglong said, "but surely it's better to resolve grudges than form new ones. You can carve me up, but let him go. Isn't it better to have one less enemy?"

"Li Jinglong," the Duchess of Guo said, deliberate. "Do you know what his father did? You wouldn't say such things if you did."

Li Jinglong was silent.

"His father killed my younger sister," the Duchess of Guo said, her voice low. "I've been waiting for the day when you would all fall into my hands."

The Duchess of Guo picked up the knife. Shaking off his shock, Hongjun craned his neck away, attempting to use the last of his strength to summon his knife so he could embed it in the duchess's throat. But all his spiritual energy had been sucked dry; he couldn't even manipulate his weapons in this most basic of ways.

At that moment, one of the duchess's rings began to glow. She hesitated for a beat, then used the knife to open a bleeding gash in Hongjun's arm.

Hongjun cried out in pain.

The Duchess of Guo turned to the three monstrosities. "Baxia, go find the Tokharian. Yazi, Suanni, keep an eye on them; don't let them die. I'll return soon."

The creatures nodded. The Duchess of Guo's ring continued to pulse with light. Li Jinglong kept a close eye on her movements as she lifted two fingers and

drew a sigil in the air; with a flash and a hum, she vanished.

In the cage, Li Jinglong's body was trembling with exhaustion. Hongjun looked up and met his gaze.

Yazi walked over to Hongjun and kneed him in the stomach. Hongjun coughed, his body spasming in pain as he collapsed and dragged the iron chains down with him. "Are you hungry?" Yazi grabbed him by the hair and hauled him up from the ground, brandishing Hongjun's own knives. "I've got something for you to eat right here."

Hongjun's chest was heaving. One of the other black-clad creatures—the one called Suanni—said, "Don't kill him."

"The Tokharian is mine," Yazi replied, but he let go of Hongjun.

A black scorch mark still scarred Yazi's stomach from A-Tai's fireballs the day before. He walked to the pool on unsteady legs and slipped into the churning blood with a quiet groan.

"I'm going," the creature called Baxia said. He scooped up some of the blood from the pool and transformed it into a ball of black flame, which he shot toward the top of the cave before disappearing.

Li Jinglong carefully watched Baxia work. Suanni followed the direction of Li Jinglong's gaze; Li Jinglong averted his eyes, but it was too late. Suanni stalked toward him.

"Don't hurt him!" Hongjun choked out, lying curled up on the ground. "He's just an ordinary mortal!"

With a cold laugh, Suanni opened the door of the cage. Before Li Jinglong could move, Suanni spat out a cloud of black fog that wound tight around him; the yaoguai didn't need to lift a finger to slam Li Jinglong against the wall.

Hongjun screamed as Li Jinglong crashed to the ground beside him, unconscious.

"Trash," Suanni scoffed.

Eyes wide, Hongjun looked down at Li Jinglong's bruised face, watching blood ooze from his nose and drip into the dirt. Hongjun began to tremble.

Suanni turned and left without bothering to toss Li Jinglong back into his cage, disappearing behind a stone pillar high up in the cavern. The instant he was out of sight, Hongjun reached out to check Li Jinglong's wrist for a pulse. Yet before he could, Li Jinglong—who was supposedly unconscious—closed his hand around Hongjun's fingers instead. He opened his eyes a crack and mouthed*, Shh.*

Hongjun breathed a sigh of relief. He was lying less than a foot from Li Jinglong now, both of them curled on their sides on the ground as they stared into each other's eyes. All was silent save for the roiling and bubbling of the blood sea.

Li Jinglong watched him without moving an inch. Time seemed to freeze—the only sign of its passage was the slight bob of Li Jinglong's throat, his eyes growing red as he resisted the urge to sob. Tears slid down the bridge of his nose, mixing with the mess of blood on his face. His mouth moved again: *Sorry*.

Hongjun mustered up a small smile for him. His injuries felt insignificant compared to the pain of seeing Li Jinglong so upset.

After a long moment, Hongjun whispered, “We’re not dead yet.”

Li Jinglong nodded and shot a glance first toward Yazi, who had sunk into the blood pool, then toward Suanni, who had disappeared into the upper reaches of the cave. A-Tai was still out there, but who knew what he was facing—they had to figure out how to save themselves.

“What can I do?” Li Jinglong asked quietly.

“Where are the others?” Hongjun whispered back.

Qiu Yongsi and Mergen were lying unconscious in cages of their own in another corner of the cave. Neither had stirred since Hongjun arrived.

“The fox yao drained their spiritual energy,” Li Jinglong whispered. “They both passed out.”

Hongjun abruptly realized that Li Jinglong was conscious only because he was an ordinary mortal; the Duchess of Guo hadn’t used the same energy-absorbing spell on him.

“Can you get to any of my throwing knives?” Hongjun asked. “We could try taking them by surprise?”

Li Jinglong raised his right hand to show Hongjun—his fingers had been broken, bent backward at a frightening angle.

Hongjun’s heart clenched in sympathetic pain, but Li Jinglong shook his head. “It doesn’t hurt right now. Don’t be scared. We should bandage your arm first.”

“Let’s wait a bit longer. If I can recover a little energy, maybe I can summon my knives back. There’s still hope.”

“How long do you need?” Li Jinglong asked. “The Duchess of Guo will be back soon.”

Hongjun had never found himself so utterly depleted. Some time had passed now, but his spiritual energy hadn’t recovered in the slightest, and his body was still weak. He felt hollowed out, as if he’d never be able to use spiritual techniques again. Hongjun tried to comfort himself—that probably wasn’t the case. When Chong Ming had taught him to use his spiritual devices, he’d said spiritual energy was created spontaneously in the meridians, in an infinite cycle and an endless flow. As long as one spent time cultivating it, it would never disappear completely.

“I don’t know.” Hongjun was buzzing with anxiety.

Li Jinglong motioned for him to calm down. He laid his broken right hand over Hongjun’s palm and said, “Can you do something about my hand? I’m in your care.”

Hongjun glanced down at his broken fingers. He couldn’t bear to hurt him further, but Li Jinglong was looking back at him steadily, as if telling him not to be afraid. After a moment of hesitation, he took hold of Li Jinglong’s long, slender pointer and middle fingers and, in one swift motion, snapped them back into place.

Li Jinglong nearly blacked out from the pain. He grabbed his right hand with his uninjured left and curled in on himself, gasping in great gulps of air. It was many minutes before the agony abated, yet he didn't make a sound.

"Does it still hurt?" Hongjun asked anxiously.

Li Jinglong flexed his fingers with some effort. "They were broken at the knuckles. I can move them a little, but I can't make a fist," he said, voice low. His breathing finally evened. "Hongjun, you said before that the heart lamp is still inside my body. Is that true?"

Chapter 33:
The Dazzling Heart Lamp

HONGJUN'S PUPILS contracted as he drew a swift breath. He stared at Li Jinglong.

"Can you teach me to use it?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun pressed a hand to Li Jinglong's bloody chest, but he had no strength in his body. He breathed for a moment, then shook his head. He bitterly regretted not asking Chong Ming to teach him more.

"Don't be afraid," Li Jinglong said. "Think carefully. How did your dad teach you to use spiritual techniques when you were starting out?"

"You have to awaken the spiritual meridians in your body." Hongjun frowned in thought as he searched for the words. "But you don't have your own spiritual energy. I don't know if the heart lamp can be activated the same way. Even if you had spiritual energy, without having studied any immortal techniques, you might not be able to do anything with it. You have to learn incantations and how to use spiritual devices…"

"Awaken?" Li Jinglong latched on to this point. "What does that mean?"

"It's the feeling you get on the brink of death; the moment before you crash to the ground after a fall from miles in the air."

Hongjun recalled the day Chong Ming had taught him how to use spiritual energy—

"You're a member of the yao race," he'd said. "If you're unable to use spiritual techniques, you'll fall to your death."

Chong Ming had picked up the small, struggling Hongjun by the collar and tossed him over a sheer cliff.

He'd yelled and screamed—then all of a sudden, he felt as if his soul had left his body. He saw the heavenly and earthly meridians, the spiritual energy flowing all throughout the world, and a great force had burst out from inside him…

In the end, it was Qing Xiong who had swooped down and caught him barely ten feet from the ground, then carried him back up into the air.

Li Jinglong stared at Hongjun, shocked by his story.

Hongjun frowned. "But you weren't born with the heart lamp. I did consider… But I didn't want to hurt you."

Li Jinglong recalled what Hongjun had begun to say the other day when he had expressed a desire to learn spiritual techniques, before the carp yao stopped him. "So that was the training you mentioned?"

Hongjun nodded and looked around again. "Where is Zhao Zilong?"

Li Jinglong shook his head. "Probably still outside."

"When he realizes I've disappeared, he'll go find my dad," Hongjun said.

“We don’t have time to wait for him,” Li Jinglong said. “We have to find our own way out.”

Hongjun lay on his side and closed his eyes. He could feel his spiritual energy returning, albeit at an extremely slow rate. *Thank the heavens.* He seemed to be recovering faster than Qiu Yongsi and Mergen—perhaps his half-yao heritage allowed him to heal more quickly than full-blooded humans. In another moment, he might almost be able to summon his throwing knives. He couldn’t control them enough to attack, but he could at least cut through the iron chains binding him.

“Let me try something.”

“No,” Li Jinglong said. “Don’t do anything rash. I’d rather you be safe.”

Hongjun waved a reassuring hand. He circulated his spiritual energy; his knife, which was lying on the ground a distance away, vibrated lightly, then began to inch toward them along the shore of the blood pool.

He sucked in a deep breath. He couldn’t make the knife fly into the air, and the simple effort of slowly sliding it along the ground left him drenched in sweat and panting by the time it reached him. Li Jinglong picked up the knife with his good hand and cut the chain around his own wrist, then freed Hongjun’s arms. They moved as little as possible, lest the chains clink and give them away.

Hongjun flexed his fingers, but still couldn’t make the knife fly. After a few attempts, he had to give up.

“Rest for a bit,” Li Jinglong said. He picked up the knife again and inched toward the cage where Mergen was held, where he quietly dug the tip into Mergen’s arm.

Mergen jolted awake from the pain. The first thing he saw was Hongjun and Li Jinglong gesturing at him not to make a sound. Li Jinglong began to slowly saw at the lock on the cage. As Mergen watched in silence, the lock abruptly fell away. Mergen’s hand shot out to catch it, but his wrist went weak; Li Jinglong snatched the lock before it could crash against the metal bars. He set it aside and handed the knife to Mergen, motioning for him to open Qiu Yongsi’s cage.

While Mergen went to work, Li Jinglong turned back to Hongjun. “Can you summon another?”

Closing his eyes, Hongjun stretched a hand toward the spiritual devices scattered on the opposite shore of the pool of blood. Another of his throwing knives began to slide toward them in fits and starts. When it was within reach, Li Jinglong grabbed hold of its hilt. Mergen lightly pricked Qiu Yongsi with the first knife, and he too startled awake in pain. Li Jinglong pressed the second knife into Qiu Yongsi’s hand for him to defend himself.

Hongjun turned his attention to summoning the third knife, but the effort left him exhausted. As soon as it arrived before them, he slumped against the wall, unable to move. Li Jinglong retrieved the knife and nodded at Hongjun—he’d done enough. Then he lay back down on the ground, hiding the last knife in his sleeve.

“Do these monsters have any fatal weak spots? A way to kill them in a single blow?” Li Jinglong asked in a whisper.

“The heart,” Mergen said.

“Where is a dragon’s heart?” Li Jinglong asked again. “The same place as a human’s?”

“In yao form, a dragon’s heart is three inches below its throat,” Qiu Yongsi said. “In human form, it’s between the ribs, just like yours.”

Li Jinglong nodded. “I’ll attack first,” he said. “Yongsi, lure one of them over here; Mergen, you help me.”

Each gripped one throwing knife, sucking in labored breaths. Mergen quietly said, “Chief, I may not be much help. It’s up to you.”

Li Jinglong nodded.

“Chief…” Hongjun quietly said, “Wait a bit longer… Let me recover some more…”

Li Jinglong smiled at Hongjun, studying his face. He stared into Hongjun’s eyes as he gave the order: “Let’s go.”

Qiu Yongsi slammed against the bars of his cage and cried, “Hongjun!”

Alerted by the sound, Suanni strode over at once. “Awake already?” he sneered.

As Suanni passed Li Jinglong, Hongjun’s pupils contracted.

Mergen kicked open the door of his cage and blocked Suanni’s path. The instant he was distracted, Li Jinglong leapt up from the ground, dragging an iron chain behind him, and threw himself toward Suanni’s undefended back.

Each of Li Jinglong’s movements were executed with full power; he had been severely beaten, but his strength hadn’t been drained. When he’d been caught, he had barely resisted, saving his energy for when he would need it most. Now he would need as much strength as he had ever exerted in his life. This was do or die—he couldn’t make a single mistake.

His sneak attack was flawless. Flying through the air, he used his right hand to wrap the chain around Suanni’s neck as he stabbed the yaoguai in the chest with his left, sinking the knife all the way to the hilt.

Suanni howled; his human shape dispersed into a cloud of black fog. He reappeared in his true form as one of the dragon’s sons—an enormous, scaled beast—and shook Li Jinglong off. Swaying on his feet, Suanni took a single staggering step before collapsing back into human form.

The spiritual devices known as the immortal-slaying knives were Hongjun’s family heirloom. Even devoid of spiritual energy, they could carve through iron like mud. With the knife embedded in his heart meridian, Suanni found his yao energy blocked as he attempted to transform—instead, his power activated the knife’s own ability. He crashed to the ground, enveloped by licking flames.

Mergen and Qiu Yongsi staggered out of their cages as Hongjun fought his way to his feet. A furious roar came from the pool, and Yazi burst out in a rain of blood, knocking Li Jinglong to the ground.

Hongjun gritted his teeth and flung out the iron chain to loop around Yazi, who quickly shook it off. Mergen clutched his knife and rammed the creature with his shoulder, while Qiu Yongsi staggered after him to help push the creature back.

Yazi knocked both of them away with a howl. Hongjun yanked the third knife out of Suanni's chest and made to join the fight just as a blaze of black flame hurtled toward them from high up in the cave. It crashed down behind Hongjun, solidifying into human form.

Hongjun cried out as a powerful hand grabbed him and lifted him bodily into the air. It was Baxia—the third son of the dragon was back.

Qiu Yongsi and Mergen both blanched. As they sprinted over to help Hongjun, Baxia waved a hand. Black smoke spewed out and knocked them into a corner of the chamber, blood spilling from fresh wounds.

"Hongjun!" Li Jinglong yelled.

A set of wicked claws extended from Baxia's fingers as he locked them around Hongjun's neck, squeezing tightly. With a burst of strength, Li Jinglong started toward Hongjun, yet he only made it a step before Yazi closed his jaws around his body and hauled him back into the blood pool.

Man and yao disappeared beneath the surface. Hongjun wanted to scream, but he couldn't make a sound. Baxia kept a firm grip on his neck, holding Hongjun over the pool with an expression of apathy.

Li Jinglong kicked against the churning blood as Yazi dragged him deeper, unable to surface. Yazi wove through the sea of blood, clamping his jaws around Li Jinglong's arm in an attempt to tear him in two.

"How do you think it would feel to watch each other die?" Baxia asked. "Would you like to find out?"

Hongjun's pupils were blown wide as he watched Li Jinglong struggle in the tide of blood beneath him. Li Jinglong trembled as he drowned in red, but all he could see was Hongjun dangling over the edge of the pool. Baxia had one hand around Hongjun's neck; the other held Hongjun's knife pressed to the side of his jaw. Slowly, he began carving along Hongjun's ear.

Blood sprayed from the side of Hongjun's face. His consciousness was growing blurry, searing pain transforming into an icy chill.

Li Jinglong opened his mouth and screamed in despair, but only a stream of bubbles emerged. Yazi's keen claws pierced his chest, and pain radiated from his heart into his entire body. His struggles grew weaker and weaker, eyes wide as he spasmed in the pool of blood.

Tears swam in Hongjun's eyes. He opened his mouth but couldn't make a sound.

The pool flared with light—

Blood exploded outward, thousands of blinding points of light scattering through the air.

"Let him go!" Li Jinglong roared, pressing his right hand to his chest as he stretched out his left in front of him. An unearthly glow enveloped him, and he panted for breath as he rose into the air, the blood receding around him. Yazi leapt from the sea of blood and lunged at Li Jinglong with his fangs bared, but was stopped short as Li Jinglong slammed his left palm against Yazi's forehead.

A blaze of light burst from his hand. Under its glow, Yazi's dragon scales erupted into a spray of black energy, and blood spewed from his body while he struggled, unable to resist the burning power of the light. Each of Yazi's scales peeled from his body as blood boiled into trails of pale vapor and his black bones began to burn—with a thunderous clap, his entire body was incinerated to ash.

Li Jinglong strode over the surface of the pool as if it was flat ground, light spreading from beneath his feet. He staggered toward Baxia, breathing heavily as he raised his head high and emerged from the sea of blood like an Asura from the depths of hell. Baxia panted harshly, his eyes reflecting the shape of the blood-soaked man with a hand encased in blinding light.

"I said, let him go!" Li Jinglong shouted.

His entire body flared with light. Even Hongjun felt as if his soul had nowhere to hide under its radiance; bathed in that light, it seemed to burn beneath his skin. The blood that soaked Li Jinglong boiled into steam. He looked like a demon on the warpath for revenge, a god descending with fervid flames in hand to incinerate every wicked thing in the world.

Baxia flung Hongjun aside and exploded into his yao form, lunging straight at Li Jinglong. Li Jinglong's aura flared, shrouding him in a searing, pure-white flame. Teeth bared, he raised his left hand and set it against Baxia's head.

"Go—to—*hell*!"

With a loud *crack*, Baxia was embedded into the stone floor. His body twitched and struggled as he wailed in pain. The light around Li Jinglong flared, turning everything in the cavern into pale silhouettes. It flashed again and again; Baxia let out a desperate howl as his body was torn to pieces and swallowed up by white-hot flames.

Hongjun, Mergen, and Qiu Yongsi raised their arms to block their eyes until the blinding aura around Li Jinglong slowly dissipated. Li Jinglong panted heavily as he looked toward Hongjun in disbelief. "I… I…"

Speechless, Hongjun stared at Li Jinglong; his strength was drained, and as the pain from his arm and his ear crashed back down on him, he nearly passed out all over again.

"Put pressure on your wound," Li Jinglong anxiously told Hongjun a short while later.

"It's fine. It doesn't hurt anymore," Hongjun replied.

"Put some ointment on it," Mergen suggested. "Which of these are for oral use and which are for external application? Hongjun, come take a look…"

Hongjun still had some medicine in his pouch. Li Jinglong used a bit of both kinds.

"We'll need to stitch that ear up as soon as possible," Qiu Yongsi said. "It would be a shame if it scarred."

"It won't," Li Jinglong said. "It'll heal fine."

Hongjun lay with his head on Li Jinglong's lap, tilting his face to let him apply the medicine. Everyone's hearts were still pounding; they had all nearly lost their lives. Now that they had made it out the other side, relieved laughter bubbled up in them. But as Li Jinglong laughed and laughed, his eyes went red, and he couldn't hold back a sob.

"Thank goodness the chief was here," Hongjun said.

The other two chimed in with their agreement, trying to change the subject. Hongjun struggled to sit up, but Li Jinglong insisted he rest a while longer.

"We still have to find a way out…" Li Jinglong began, but his words were cut off as his heart suddenly clenched in pain.

Now it was Hongjun's turn to worry. "What is it?"

As Li Jinglong waved him off, Mergen said, "You probably injured your heart meridian using that spiritual technique. Lie down for a bit."

Li Jinglong insisted he was fine. He looked back down at Hongjun and asked, "Does this mean I can use the heart lamp now?"

Hongjun didn't entirely understand either. "Don't mess around with it. A surge in spiritual energy like that can easily damage your meridians."

Despite itching to try out his new spiritual technique, Li Jinglong was unable to summon it again. Only in his moment of pure desperation had he been able to exert that explosive power.

"The heart lamp is the spiritual device of the Chen family, the hereditary house of Dipamkara," Qiu Yongsi said. "It will meld with the meridians in the body, but it also eats away at the heart meridian's strength. Chief, it probably activated because the circumstances were dire—you mustn't use it without good reason."

Li Jinglong frowned. "Our circumstances are still dire. We shouldn't stay here too long; let's not get stuck on the heart lamp. We can discuss it after we get out of here."

After his arm and ear had been bandaged, Hongjun began to feel more energetic. Mergen retrieved their spiritual devices from the corner, handing Qiu Yongsi his riverscape brush.

"Once our spiritual energy recovers, we should be able to make it out." Mergen looked up at the transportation array at the top of the cave. "If that fox yao gives us another twenty-four hours, perhaps we could take her in a fight."

"She took my pentacolor sacred light," Hongjun said.

"Should we set an ambush?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

"Let's hide first." After a few steadying breaths, Li Jinglong got to his feet. "We need to dispose of these bodies."

In truth, Suanni's was the only body left. The four of them worked together to push it into the pool of blood, where it slowly sank. Given how Baxia had mysteriously appeared after Suanni's death, it was likely that, as fellow sons of the dragon, they had some special connection when one of their lives was in peril. The four exorcists were lucky to be alive after launching such a rash attack.

Upon exploring the cave, they found a small pool situated high up on the cavern walls, the banks of which were littered with pieces of rotten meat. No wonder Suanni had gone up there. After a brief discussion, they decided to rest there for a while and recover their spiritual energy. If the Duchess of Guo should return, they could launch an attack then.

Chapter 34:
Escape via Spiritual Device

"WHAT THE HELL," Mergen groused. "Where did A-Tai go?"

Qiu Yongsi was still breathing hard. "Isn't this a good thing? At least we know he's not in danger."

Hongjun frowned. "How did you guys end up here?"

Apparently, after everyone had split up the night before, Mergen, Qiu Yongsi, and Li Jinglong all stepped into traps before the carp yao could find them. Arrays identical to the one Hongjun and A-Tai stumbled upon had been carved in another tunnel beneath the moat, a civilian residence near Goose Pagoda, and a mountain cave outside the city. Qiu Yongsi and Mergen had both imbued the array with spiritual energy to investigate it, triggering the blood droplet's attack. Li Jinglong, however, had been ambushed. At the critical moment, he made the daring choice not to flee, but to play possum and pretend to pass out instead. He had thus found himself in this cavern.

Only Hongjun and A-Tai had picked up the copper plate first, thus avoiding the array's transportation spell.

"But wouldn't any ordinary person…pour their spiritual energy into the array to see what happens?" Mergen asked.

"Maybe," Hongjun said, "but we're not ordinary people. Did you only just figure that out? Also, where did Zhao Zilong go?"

The carp yao looked left and right as he sprinted down a dark street, clutching his sachet full of oblivion pollen. At the door of the Department of Exorcism, he yelled, "Hongjun! Where are you?!"

"Zhao Zilong?"

Scared out of his wits, the carp yao screeched and whipped around to discover that this time, it was A-Tai who'd found him.

An incense stick's worth of time later, man and fish stood in the courtyard.

"Great," A-Tai said. "Now Hongjun's disappeared too."

Heavens above! Nothing was as important as Hongjun, and now he'd managed to lose him in a potentially dangerous situation. If his bosses back in Yaojin Palace learned of this, Zhao Zilong would find himself on the chopping board. Who knew if he'd be sliced up and served raw or deep-fried and doused in a sweet and sour sauce? He shook from head to tail.

"Why aren't you with Hongjun?!" the carp yao howled.

"I was tired," A-Tai said. "I hadn't slept for a whole day and night, so I took a nap beneath a bridge and overslept."

"What do we do? What do we do? Aaahhhh!"

A-Tai shushed him. There was no use panicking. The worst had already happened; all they could do now was focus on finding everyone as quickly as possible.

"Let's go," A-Tai said. "I have a lead."

A-Tai brought the carp yao to the base of Jiuqu Bridge and pointed up. The carp yao saw the curving lines of an array carved on its bottom.

"This is the first one," A-Tai said. "Follow me."

Man and fish waded into the water. Trembling, the carp yao said, "I only took a peek in Pingkang Ward while I was passing through…"

"Stop right there." A-Tai put a hand to his forehead and said, "No one's going to blame you. You're not an exorcist."

"But it's my duty to protect Hongjun!" the carp yao wailed hysterically. "I told *you* all to protect him, and now look what's happened!"

A-Tai had no response. He stopped before another array and called out, "Stop yelling and come look at this."

The carp yao hurried over and examined the array. A-Tai brought him deeper into the tunnel, where they saw four more. As they proceeded, the carp yao noticed Hongjun's familiar footprints on the ground—they followed the path he had taken to the hollowed-out mountain cave.

A-Tai peered into the copper plate at the center of the array in the cave. It was empty. The carp yao stared dumbly at the array for a while, then lifted one leg and tapped a toe inside it. Nothing happened.

A-Tai thought back to the moment he and Hongjun had discovered the same array in the canal—this array must be intimately connected to everyone's disappearance. Before the carp yao could prompt him, A-Tai slowly suffused it with spiritual energy.

The sigils lit up, but without the power of the blood droplet, nothing more happened.

At the same moment, the array carved into the ceiling of the cave above the blood pool also lit up. On high alert, the exorcists grabbed their spiritual devices and stared vigilantly at the glow.

"No…" It was the faint sound of A-Tai's voice. "The array can't be activated without the key."

"A-Tai!" Li Jinglong shouted. "Don't go, but don't come in either!"

They next heard the carp yao: "I think I can hear that unlucky bastard?"

Li Jinglong's mouth snapped shut.

"Are you sure it's not a figment of your imagination…?" A-Tai replied.

Everyone rushed forward. Qiu Yongsi yelled, "A-Tai! Watch your back!"

"Now it's that lumbering idiot," the carp yao's voice said.

Qiu Yongsi pressed a hand to his forehead. “They gave us nicknames?!”

“Zhao Zilong!” Hongjun shouted.

“Hongjun? It’s Hongjun!” The carp yao nearly danced for joy.

This time, A-Tai heard it too. He shouted, “Hongjun! Are you guys in there?”

Though the array couldn’t transport anyone, the spiritual energy suffusing it allowed both sides to hear each other’s voices.

“Hongjun, you’re not injured, are you?!” the carp yao asked.

Hongjun cupped a hand over his ear, which had just stopped bleeding, and yelled back, “Nope! Are you guys all right? Where did you go?”

The carp yao said, “I stopped for groceries in the West Market on my way back… What do you want for dinner?”

“Zhao Zilong, get out of the way!” A-Tai snapped. “Put the chief on. What happened?”

Li Jinglong stepped forward and explained their current predicament. A-Tai said, “Then, we have to find a blood droplet…”

“No, no,” Qiu Yongsi said. “This looks like a one-way array. If you come in, you might get stuck too.”

When the Duchess of Guo and Baxia left, neither of them had used this array. Instead, they both drew a sigil in midair and disappeared, meaning they must have used some other method.

“A-Tai, go look for the duchess—she’s our primary target,” Li Jinglong ordered. “Once you find her, watch her; make sure she doesn’t go anywhere. We’ll try to figure something out on our end.”

A-Tai accepted his orders and left with the carp yao running along behind him.

A chilly gale blew through the streets of Chang’an. A-Tai hoisted the carp yao onto his back and headed for the Duchess of Guo’s estate, only to find upon reaching it that the emperor, the noble consort, and the Duchess of Guo had all returned to Mount Li.

Making a detour through the underground market to rent a horse, A-Tai and the carp yao galloped off, leaving the city behind.

Time dripped by inside the cave. No one said a word, each circulating qi to heal their wounds. Li Jinglong was first to break the silence, taking a deep breath. “How is everyone doing?”

Hongjun was recovering the fastest. He had restored about a fifth of his cultivation and could control his throwing knives again.

Qiu Yongsi said, “Do you remember the sigil the Duchess of Guo drew before she left? We could give it a try.”

Li Jinglong drew the shape on the ground from memory. “I don’t understand sigils, so I don’t know if I got it right.”

Qiu Yongsi studied it in silence.

Hongjun sat cross-legged next to the pool of blood, thinking about what the Duchess of Guo had said before she left: *His father killed my younger sister. I've been waiting for the day when you would all fall into my hands…*

Not long ago, Yang Yuhuan had seemed surprised to meet Hongjun and said he looked familiar. Had the noble consort and the Duchess of Guo both known his father?

Chong Ming had personally assigned him this mission. Even if he hadn't been the one to give him the instructions, Hongjun knew his dad wanted him to discover the truth behind his birth parents' deaths. He pondered the duchess's words with a furrowed brow. Gradually, it dawned on him that the vision he'd seen after inhaling oblivion pollen might have been…

Was that my mom and dad?

"Hongjun?"

Qiu Yongsi's voice summoned him back to the present.

Li Jinglong frowned. "He's tired."

Hongjun looked up and saw the other three watching him in confusion.

"Do you know any technique that can break through an akasha realm?" Mergen asked.

Qiu Yongsi rolled up his sleeves, twirled his brush, and attempted to draw the duchess's sigil in the air. It flashed and gave a faint hum without transporting them anywhere.

Thinking back, the Duchess of Guo's ring had lit up when she drew the transportation sigil. They concluded there must be some spiritual device outside of the akasha realm that resonated with the ring to create a passage through space.

"The spell uses that resonance to transport its user," Qiu Yongsi said, looking up at them. "This pocket realm contains a blood pool. On the outside, a droplet of blood resonates with the pool to create a link between them, like a key going into a lock. The droplet is the key, and the pool is the lock; once the array is activated, it transports the user of the key inside."

Hongjun couldn't believe Qiu Yongsi had figured it out so quickly. "In that case, if we want to get out, we have to create our own lock on the outside, for which we have the key," he said.

Qiu Yongsi nodded. "Can you sense the pentacolor sacred light while the Duchess of Guo has it?"

"Let me try," Hongjun said. He put his hand atop Qiu Yongsi's and muttered under his breath. After a moment, he shook his head and frowned. "I can't."

Everyone fell into a pensive silence again. Mergen asked, "Could we use the oblivion pollen Zhao Zilong is carrying?"

"It has to be a matched pair of spiritual devices," Qiu Yongsi fretted. "And they must be able to resonate with each other…"

“I’ve got it!” Hongjun cried.

Everyone turned toward him. Smiling broadly, Hongjun said, “The immortal-slaying knives! They’re a set of four, and the duchess must have the fourth! I’ve got this!”

Hongjun began to roll up his sleeves. “Hold on,” Li Jinglong said. “Let’s make sure everyone is fully prepared before we go. When we see the duchess, we attack first and ask questions later. If she retaliates, everyone will see she’s a yaoguai; she won’t be able to escape notice. If she doesn’t, even better. Either way, we have a fight ahead of us.”

Dusk found Li Longji soaking in Huaqing Pool on Mount Li. He sighed deeply, utterly exhausted.

Yang Yuhuan sat beside him, scraping pearl powder with a little silver knife. “Your Majesty, are you still thinking about what happened?” she quietly asked.

“I can’t help but fret,” Li Longji said. “I can pass important matters of state on to Heng-er, but tell me—how is he to handle demons and monsters?”

Yang Yuhuan summoned a small smile. “I’m sure there won’t be any major issues—we have the legacy Duke Di left us, as well as Li Jinglong’s assistance.”

“The monsters have appeared right beneath our noses,” Li Longji said. “Whenever we recall that day, we cannot help but feel waves of lingering fright.”

“It’s all thanks to Your Majesty that the heavens chose to protect our Great Tang, allowing those children to defeat the monsters in time,” Yang Yuhuan murmured in her soft voice.

Li Longji chuckled. He muttered absently, “But after that incident with the fox yao, Guozhong said a few things we cannot forget.”

“What did he say?” Yang Yuhuan asked in surprise. “The Department of Exorcism is under his purview, but he doesn’t seem to take it all that seriously.”

“He said…” Li Longji hesitated; whatever Yang Guozhong had said, it seemed to have deeply affected him. “He said those exorcists are highly talented. What normal soldier could stand against them? Take that Yazdegerd for example; he could take on at least a hundred men by himself. As long as these people are loyal to Great Tang, they serve as shining examples for the troops…but what if, one day, they are no longer loyal?”

When Yang Yuhuan did not reply, he went on, “Every human being has emotions and desires. When I weakened the Chancellery, I did so in order to allow for checks and balances between the Chancellery, the Central Secretariat, and the Department of State Affairs. The Department of Exorcism has just a few men—but who will check their power if the worst were to happen?”

Yang Yuhuan thought for a moment. “When I met Li Jinglong and that child, their eyes were clear, and they both had a clean and honest aura about them. I doubt they would disrupt public order.”

“You say that,” Li Longji interjected, “but what about after ten years, a hundred years, thousands of generations? Governance can’t rely on judgments of individual character. This is what concerns us.”

“Take it one step at a time. A solution will surely appear,” Yang Yuhuan said with a gentle smile. “Perhaps the Right Chancellor and the department chief are thinking the same…”

Yang Yuhuan trailed off; the silver-handled knife in her hand had begun to glow and buzz, startling them both.

“What’s going on?” Yang Yuhuan said, frowning. “We were just talking… and…”

“Put it down!” Li Longji said. “Where did you get that thing?”

“I…I don’t remember…” Yang Yuhuan dropped the knife she had been using to scrape pearl powder. “I saw it in Dajie’s home the other day; I picked it up because I needed something for my pearl powder!”

“You didn’t ask first?” Li Longji was shocked. “What sort of spiritual device is this?”

The silver knife glowed brighter and brighter, slowly rising into the air as it vibrated, the blade turning toward Li Longji. Yang Yuhuan leapt into the pool and threw herself in front of the emperor without hesitation. Hair soaked and clothes clinging to her skin, Yang Yuhuan pressed her back against Li Longji, chest heaving. They watched as the knife gleamed white, electricity crackling across its surface.

Li Longji picked up a glass dish and lunged forward to trap the knife beneath it just as the blade turned dazzlingly bright.

Lightning arced out in all directions. With a final low hum, a blood-soaked Li Jinglong tumbled out from the blinding electric glare.

Yang Yuhuan screamed as he splashed into the pool. “Guards!”

Li Longji shouted, “Guards! Hurry—”

“Where…?” Li Jinglong began.

Before he could finish, Qiu Yongsi and Mergen crashed into the pool after him, followed by Hongjun, all of them spat headfirst from the radiant blaze of light.

“Ouch!” The cut on Hongjun’s ear was still fresh, and he grimaced in pain as the warm spring water soaked his wound. He splashed to his feet, accidentally treading on Yang Yuhuan’s foot as the four exorcists flailed about in the hot spring.

Yang Yuhuan cried, “Who *are* you people?!”

“Sorry!” Hongjun yelled. “I’m sorry, Uncle!”

“It’s His Majesty!” Li Jinglong shouted.

Li Longji’s eyes bulged; he was momentarily speechless. Li Jinglong couldn’t kneel in the hot spring, but he couldn’t just stay standing either. He settled on dipping into a bow, but only managed to faceplant into the water before emerging again, sputtering for breath.

Mergen and Qiu Yongsi hurriedly wiped their faces and dragged Hongjun toward them.

“Assassins!”

“Catch them!”

The entire Shenwu Guard arrived bearing powerful crossbows—they, too, chose to attack first and ask questions later.

“Wait—” Li Jinglong tried to say.

Li Longji shouted, “Stop! Put down your weapons!”

Gasping for breath, Li Jinglong stumbled out of the pool. “Your Majesty… Please allow this subject to report…”

“What happened?” Yang Yuhuan interrupted him. “You’re hurt!”

“We were pursuing a fox yao…” Li Jinglong began, only to find himself face-to-face with the Duchess of Guo, who had hurried over at the sound of shouting.

“Attack!” Li Jinglong cried, not sparing Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan another thought.

In the blink of an eye, Mergen had nocked an arrow to his bowstring and Qiu Yongsi was waving his brush through the air. The seven nailhead arrows tore toward the duchess as spreading ink began to transform Huaqing Pool into a painted landscape.

Without a moment of hesitation, the duchess flicked her sleeve, sending the seven nailhead arrows flying back the way they came. Her eyes flashed with light as a wave of energy rippled through the air.

“Kill them,” she said coolly.

The Shenwu guards pulled the triggers of their crossbows, sending a rain of bolts hurtling indiscriminately toward Li Jinglong and the others in the pool, not even attempting to avoid the emperor.

At the same moment, A-Tai was galloping up Mount Li as fast as his horse would carry him with the carp yao on his back. He heard an explosion in the distance and saw every Shenwu guard in the vicinity rushing toward Huaqing Palace.

“Protect His Majesty!”

A-Tai vaulted off the horse amid the shouts and screams, then hiked up his robes and charged after them into Huaqing Palace as arrows flew over their heads. On his back, the carp yao wailed, “Waaah, watch out! I’m not a shield!”

“What’s going on?!” A-Tai yelled. “Why are we fighting our own people?”

Chaos reigned inside the palace, Shenwu guards fighting their fellows on all sides. A loud *crack* came from Huaqing Pool, like the sound of something snapping, and the ceiling began to crumble.

By the pool, Li Longji's hair was sopping wet, but he had thrown his dragon robe over his shoulders. "The Duchess of Guo means to assassinate us!" he shouted, immediately grasping the critical point. "Execute her on the spot!"

"Your Majesty," Li Jinglong began, "this is an emergency. If fighting breaks out here…"

The emperor grabbed Li Jinglong by the collar and yelled, "Get to the point!"

"I'm afraid we'll d-d-destroy…"

"Destroy whatever you need!"

For Li Longji, this was no more than the wave of a hand, but the exorcists couldn't have been more relieved if they'd been given a general pardon. Li Jinglong called out, "Avoid harming our brothers in the Shenwu Guard! Otherwise, capture the yao at all costs!"

Hongjun, Qiu Yongsi, and Mergen shouted their acknowledgment and took off after the Duchess of Guo.

More and more Shenwu guards charged in from outside the palace, adding to the confusion. Anyone in the duchess's vicinity instantly turned traitorous, only faltering for a moment before rushing toward the exorcists.

"I'll take the lead!" Qiu Yongsi shouted "Everyone else, follow me! His Majesty said to destroy whatever we need!"

He swept his brush through the air, and the entirety of Huaqing Palace shivered. Every carved balustrade, mural of strange beasts, and even the court ladies, lions, hawks, fish, and dragons painted on every ceramic object and lantern peeled away and shot toward the soldiers guarding the duchess in a thousand streaks of colored light.

The soldiers were immediately overwhelmed. The colorful dragons that uncoiled themselves from the pillars couldn't breathe fire, but they were enormous. They looped through the air and crashed into the soldiers, knocking them to the ground.

"Since when could you do that?!" Li Jinglong demanded. "Why didn't you do it earlier?!"

"If I could have, I would have!" Qiu Yongsi yelled back. "Did you see any murals in that cave?"

The Duchess of Guo howled. She rose from the ground in her great fox form, toppling several pillars along the way. Black flame spurted from her mouth, rolling across the ground and leaving the Shenwu guards screaming in pain.

"All right! We'll destroy whatever we need!" Mergen leapt up, scaling a collapsed rafter in a few bounds. He somersaulted, bow sweeping in an arc as he loosed all seven of his arrows at the fox yao before he'd completed his flip.

"Are you coming?" Li Jinglong called to Hongjun.

"Wait!" Hongjun was still counting the fox's tails. One, two, three…eight? A fox of her power should have had nine—she was missing one!

The fox roared, wary of Mergen's nailhead arrows as she ducked and dodged through Huaqing Palace, toppling red-painted columns all along her path. The exorcists leapt onto the roof and took off in pursuit.

As Hongjun clambered up to a higher perch, Li Jinglong yelled, "Hongjun! What are you doing?! Use your knives!"

Hongjun looked down at Li Jinglong and mimed pushing his hands out. Li Jinglong looked back at him in puzzlement, and they stared at each other for a beat before Hongjun nodded vigorously and pointed at himself, anxiety clear on his face.

Li Jinglong turned and saw the jade peacock feather hanging from the eight-tailed fox's neck.

"Get his pentacolor sacred light!" Li Jinglong shouted. "It's around the fox yao's neck!"

Chapter 35:
Throwing Knives Merge

NIGHT BEGAN TO FALL as the Shenwu guards closed in on them. Li Jinglong wished he had three heads and six arms as he alternated between shooting at the fox yao and the bewitched guards, trying to subdue the creature and protect Li Longji at the same time.

"Your Majesty!" Li Jinglong shouted over his shoulder. "You don't need to come out here! Get back inside!"

"Don't worry about us!" Li Longji yelled. Imperial sword in hand, he flung back the sleeves of his dragon robes and rushed forward to join the fray, kicking his own soldiers out of the corridor.

How could Li Jinglong not worry? If the emperor died, Great Tang would be done for! Surrounded by bewitched guards ready to fight them to the death, the only thought in Li Jinglong's head was: *Whatever gods are out there, send help, please!*

"Hai mie hou bi—my dear brothers-in-arms!"

A whirlwind spun up out of the air, peeling up the glazed tiles of Huaqing Palace's rooftops and clearing the plaza in front of the palace with earth-shattering force.

"A-Tai!" everyone shouted in fury.

"You're late!" Li Jinglong yelled.

A-Tai waved his fan left and right; gales sent brick and tile flying as an icy windstorm roared through Huaqing Palace's central courtyard.

Mergen whistled. "Chief!"

The two of them charged out of the corridor. Mergen drew back his bowstring and loosed seven arrows in a row. Li Jinglong kept his own arrow nocked to the bow, running up a collapsed wooden pillar with his eyes fixed on the fox yao, tracking her movements.

A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi halted the eight-tailed fox's advance, while four of Mergen's arrows blocked her path of retreat. The fox roared, fire spewing from her mouth as she dodged back, only to find the other three arrows taking aim at her neck.

In that moment, everything else retreated from Li Jinglong's vision—all he could see was that gleaming jade peacock feather. He loosed one arrow, then nocked another and drew his bow again.

His first shot streaked toward the giant fox yao, grazing the side of her neck as she evaded Mergen's arrows. The rope holding the pendant snapped in two. The fox yowled in rage. The instant the jade peacock feather began to fall, Li Jinglong loosed his second shot. The arrow clipped the edge of the pendant as it sped past, sending it spinning up toward the eaves with a bright ringing sound.

“Thanks!” Hongjun shouted. He slid down the roof tiles like a swooping hawk and snatched the jade peacock feather out of the air.

The fox yao turned toward Hongjun and breathed a burst of black flame, which he blocked with his shield of sacred light. He tossed out his grappling hook and swung up onto the opposite rooftop, and the fox yao crouched and leapt up after him, sending tiles flying. Spotting the fox yao over his shoulder, Hongjun took off across the roof of Huaqing Palace.

“Hongjun! It’s your turn to attack!” the carp yao hollered.

“When did *you* get here?!” Li Jinglong shouted upon hearing the carp yao. “Give them some oblivion pollen!”

“But it’s so expensive…”

“Do it!” Li Jinglong roared.

“Well, if you’re sure…”

“Stop blabbering and get on with it!” everyone bellowed in unison.

Seeing the Shenwu guards about to rush them again, the exorcists retreated to form a defensive line in front of Li Longji. The carp yao sprang down from A-Tai’s back.

“What…what is this creature?” Li Longji cried in shock.

The carp spun around with an elegant flick of his tail and began scattering the oblivion pollen. Everyone held their breath as the Shenwu guards began to sneeze. With the fox yao out of sight, the guards who had raised their weapons against Li Longji froze with blank looks on their faces, freed of her control by the effects of the pollen.

“Don’t get too close to His Majesty!” Li Jinglong was terrified Li Longji would sniff the oblivion pollen and forget his promise—he didn’t want to go bankrupt.

Holding the pentacolor sacred light in his left hand and all four of his throwing knives in his right, Hongjun leapt nimbly across the palace roof. The fox yao was right behind him, grinding tiles to dust beneath her paws. Hongjun spun around and screeched to a halt, gripping his throwing knives between his fingers as he stared warily into the fox yao’s eyes.

The fox yao was shaking uncontrollably. Hongjun’s chest rose and fell as he caught his breath. “An eight-tailed fox?” he said quietly. “You can’t be the yao king.”

The fox yao scoffed and snapped, “Don’t you know who cut off my ninth tail?”

Hongjun started in surprise.

The fox yao opened her mouth and spewed a towering funnel of black flame, swallowing the roof where Hongjun stood. Hongjun expanded his light barrier to cover the main hall of Huaqing Palace; when the flames burned out, he was utterly unharmed. She stared at Hongjun in shock.

“Fox yao,” he called out, “I have a question for you. How did you know my father?”

The fox yao sneered. “What right does Chong Ming’s bastard have to ask me anything?!”

“Don’t insult my dad!” Furious, Hongjun pressed all four immortal-slaying throwing knives together until they fused into a single blade. Their powers of wind, lightning, water, and fire crackled around him as the combined blade stretched and grew until it became a fierce anti-cavalry saber nearly six feet in length, rays of light shooting from its blade.

The fox yao cried out in rage, “This saber again!”

She sprang toward Hongjun. Hongjun summoned a light barrier from the jade peacock feather in his left hand, taking a claw strike to the shoulder. With a sharp hum, a wave of energy exploded outward and sent the enormous thirty-foot fox flying. He flicked the tip of his long saber upward.

The fox yao shrieked in pain. She spat black flame into the air, but the saber tore through space itself, sending ripples through the ether. Her flames shredded like paper as the space they occupied shattered under the blade’s overwhelming force. As the shock waves bore down on the fox yao, the outermost of her eight tails ripped off like pasted paper, spouting a fountain of dark blood.

Hongjun swung his saber once more with a shout. Fear showed in the fox yao’s eyes, and she turned and dropped back to the ground. The second swing missed its target, but its destructive power didn’t weaken in the slightest. The entire side hall of Huaqing Palace was forced aside and collapsed with a great rumble. The saber glare continued on toward the mountain’s slope beyond the palace, a wave of bright energy that toppled trees and sent boulders tumbling in its wake. An avalanche of loose stone began to slide down the mountains, sending half a cliff face plummeting into the ravine beneath Mount Li with a cacophonous roar.

The rest of the exorcists arrived just in time to see the side hall and the cliff face collapse, and froze in shock.

“You… This…” Li Jinglong stuttered. “Hongjun? What kind of spiritual technique was that?”

Hongjun panted heavily, propping himself up with his saber. “She…she insulted my dad.”

A-Tai was first to recover. “After her!”

Aside from Li Jinglong and A-Tai—their fresh reinforcement—everyone was spent. Li Jinglong and A-Tai gave chase as the now-seven-tailed fox staggered into the rear hall, leaving a trail of blood.

“Wait,” Hongjun called out. “You have to cut off her tails one by one, or you won’t be able to… Wait! Chief!”

At any other time, merging the immortal-slaying knives wouldn’t have taxed Hongjun so greatly. But between his injuries and having his spiritual energy drained by the fox yao, he was struggling to stay upright.

“Let’s go!” Mergen offered him a steadying hand as they ran after the others.

In the rear hall, the wind snatched at the fluttering gauze curtains. Yang Yuhuan was pacing back and forth in worry when a giant, injured gray fox barreled into the room.

Yang Yuhuan turned in shock. “Jie?!” she asked, her voice trembling.

She hadn’t gotten a close look in Huaqing Pool before Li Longji rushed her to the rear hall for her safety. He had told her not to come out, no matter what. Hearing the sounds of fighting and crashes from outside, she had already been fretting over whether she should continue to obey his order. She had never expected a giant fox to come crashing in.

Yang Yuhuan had seen Li Jinglong and his subordinates attack the Duchess of Guo with her own eyes, but still she found herself unable to believe that the giant creature before her was the eldest sister who had spent years by her side.

The fox slowly approached Yang Yuhuan, tears pooling in its great eyes.

Yang Yuhuan’s chest rose and fell as she gasped for breath. She raised a trembling hand, and the fox lowered its head and lightly touched her hand with its nose.

“Meimei…”[6] Giant tears rolled from the fox’s eyes. Her voice sounded as if she was on the verge of sobbing. “When will—”

Everyone else tumbled into the hall, Hongjun just barely managing to stay on his feet, using his saber for support. Li Longji stepped out of the crowd, shocked, and Yang Yuhuan glanced toward him.

The fox yao let out a low roar, and beams of red light shot from her eyes. Yang Yuhuan’s eyes flickered.

“Watch out!” Li Jinglong yelled. The carp yao rushed forward to dose her with oblivion pollen, but the fox yao was faster. She opened her jaws and snatched the dazed Yang Yuhuan up in her mouth.

“Beloved!” Li Longji cried.

Yang Yuhuan didn’t seem to have heard a thing, dangling from the fox yao’s mouth as the creature crashed through another wall of the rear hall and fled. Everyone bolted outside just in time to see the fox yao disappear into the forest. Her gray fur blended with the shadowed mountainside, and within moments, she melted into the night.

Li Jinglong stared. A few paces away, the emperor stumbled and nearly fell to his knees; he braced one hand against the broken wall, gasping for breath. Li Jinglong hurried to help him up and lead him back to the others.

Everyone looked at each other in silence as Hongjun collapsed on the ground, utterly spent. “What do we do now?”

Huaqing Palace’s hot springs hall, side hall, central courtyard, and rear hall looked as if they had weathered a hurricane. Everything was in shambles—it seemed the Department of Exorcism would be cementing their title as the number one demolition team in Great Tang. Li Jinglong stared at the devastation his subordinates had wrought with a near-meditative calm. His only hope was that, when this was all over, the emperor would remember he’d told them to destroy whatever they needed.

Li Longji sat on a pile of dusty debris, hair loose and feet bare. “What in heaven’s name is going on here? Explain.”

A Shenwu guard ran over to ask for new orders. “Your Majesty…”

Furious, Li Longji shouted, “Get out of here, you useless trash! What are we keeping you around for?!”

“Please judge this matter fairly, Your Majesty,” Li Jinglong said, cupping his fist. “It’s not their fault. Bewitchment is the fox yao’s specialty.”

Hongjun leaned against a pillar, weak with hunger and thirst. “Look on the bright side—they’re still alive. It’s a blessing the ordinary mortals didn’t slaughter each other in droves.”

“If you discovered the Duchess of Guo was a yao, why didn’t you say anything?” Li Longji asked.

“If we’d had any other choice, we wouldn’t have confronted her here,” Li Jinglong said helplessly. As he reported the results of the past few days’ investigation to Li Longji, fear finally flickered across the emperor’s face.

Everyone fell silent, waiting for the emperor’s verdict. Hongjun hadn’t noticed the last time they met, but looking at him now, he was struck by how old the emperor seemed. Li Longji was already sixty-six years of age, and the liver spots dotting his face were plain to see—the mark of a man past his prime.

“Department of Exorcism, you will accompany us back to Chang’an,” Li Longji said at last. “We will send a messenger ahead with our edict and instruct the six divisions of the imperial guard to search for the noble consort outside the city. Li Jinglong, retrieve our armor from Huaqing Palace. We will not stop until she is found.”

An hour later, a forest of torches beat back the darkness as the exorcists prepared to set out amid the clinking of armor.

Hongjun was faint with hunger by the time they settled down for a brief rest. Fortunately, Huaqing Palace had food and drink aplenty. It was too dark to see what exactly he was eating, but he felt much better after scarfing it down.

“Time to go,” Li Jinglong said as he passed by. “You can eat more in Chang’an.”

Li Longji was dressed in the Son of Heaven’s dragon armor, glittering gold under the flickering torchlight. Li Jinglong followed in a set of black armor, visor pushed up to reveal his handsome face.

A messenger arrived at a gallop and leapt off his horse, tearing into Huaqing Palace. “Report—” he yelled.

“Speak,” Li Longji commanded, grim-faced.

The messenger glanced at Li Jinglong and the others behind him. “Speak!” Li Longji’s voice rose. “Or we will have your head!”

Hongjun shivered. The human emperor was old, but his imposing presence was undiminished. The Ziwei Star gave him an awe-inspiring air of power; the messenger shook in his boots.

“Chang’an…has been swallowed by darkness. The city gates won’t open, everyone… Everyone’s been possessed!”

Li Longji glanced at Li Jinglong. Bracing himself, Li Jinglong responded, “Perhaps it’s exactly as Your Majesty suspected.”

A chill ran up the exorcists’ spines. The Duchess of Guo dared to flee to Chang’an?

In the chilling silence that followed, everyone could hear the faint tremor in Li Longji’s voice. “Preposterous. Does that fox yao think we are helpless against her?”

Anxiety rippled through the assembly; no one dared respond. A long moment later, Li Longji stalked out of Huaqing Palace, chest working as he mastered himself.

Outside the hall, the braziers had been lit. The soldiers who hadn’t been freed by the oblivion pollen were waking up in batches as the fox yao’s technique faded. Whispering among themselves, they quickly shared the basics of what had happened and why Huaqing Palace was in tatters around them. They all knew the Shenwu Guard was in deep trouble with the emperor; none of them spoke, kneeling together on the plaza outside as they awaited the emperor’s verdict.

Li Longji stood before Huaqing Palace’s broad front plaza. After a long silence, he asked, “Where are the messengers?”

The messengers stepped forward. “Present!”

“Take the fastest horses you have; send one group to summon General Guo Ziyi from Luoyang,” Li Longji said. “Send another to summon General Geshu Han from Tong Pass. Tell them this: They are to lead their troops to Chang’an and prepare to aid their sovereign.”

Li Jinglong blanched. “Your Majesty!”

“Do you think you can save Chang’an with the Department of Exorcism alone?” Li Longji said coldly.

“Your Majesty,” Li Jinglong said, “If you divert the troops from Luoyang and Tong Pass, I fear rebellion will break out. This subordinate…is willing to try.”

Li Longji turned to face Li Jinglong. They eyed each other for a moment before Li Longji nodded. The emperor turned toward the other exorcists, who looked back at him in silence. Li Jinglong beckoned them over, and after a brief discussion, Hongjun looked up at Li Longji.

“We can help you save your wife,” Hongjun said. “Emperor.”

Mergen quickly shushed him.

Hongjun had always liked Noble Consort Yang. Now that he was certain she wasn’t a fox yao, he was greatly relieved.

“Do you need to rest first?” Li Longji asked.

“There’s no point in rushing now,” Li Jinglong said. “If we arrive at Chang’an before dawn, that should be sufficient.”

Li Longji called, “Shenwu Guard, attention! March!”

Shortly after midnight, two thousand Shenwu guards had marched down from Mount Li and begun to wind their way toward Chang’an.

The Department of Exorcism cantered along at their own pace. Hongjun urged his horse to catch up with Li Jinglong’s and asked, “Chief, are you planning to take the underwater passage through the moat?”

Li Jinglong nodded. “Hongjun, do you really think the heart lamp can break the fox yao’s technique?”

“Maybe.” Hongjun didn’t dare to claim too much certainty. “But I’m afraid your body won’t be able to bear the strain.”

Everyone had seen the power of Li Jinglong’s heart lamp in the blood pool cavern. That light had easily slain creatures as powerful as the dragon’s sons, dispersing their yao energy as it burned their bodies to ash. The power that had burst from his body was nigh-unstoppable, surely capable of destroying even intangible spiritual techniques. Of all the attacks an exorcist might encounter, those that dealt in the intangible were the most frightening. A fox yao’s charm spell or the malign energy of a resentful spirit couldn’t be blocked by the pentacolor sacred light, absorbed by the riverscape brush, pierced by the seven nailhead arrows, or swept away by the cyclone fan.

But it seemed they could be destroyed by the heart lamp.

There was no time to experiment. Qiu Yongsi had been first to suggest this approach during their discussion, and everyone decided it was worth a try. If they failed, they could retreat outside the city and think of something else.

Mergen had suggested that no matter how strong the fox yao was, repeatedly bewitching the Shenwu Guard must be draining her energy. She could do it once or twice—but could she control thousands of soldiers indefinitely? And what about the six hundred thousand civilian households of Chang’an?

Either way, they felt they had a shot.

“Let’s ride double,” Li Jinglong said. “Hongjun, come here.”

Hongjun guided his horse to run beside Li Jinglong’s and leapt from the saddle, abandoning his steed for Li Jinglong’s. He shuffled up behind Li Jinglong until they were riding chest to back.

“I didn’t know your throwing knives were so powerful,” Li Jinglong said, pushing up his visor. “I can see they take a toll on you. That was some serious destruction you caused—when we reach the city, use them with caution.”

“The emperor said destroy whatever we needed,” Hongjun protested.

“You still need to be careful. You could accidentally cut our own allies in half with a single strike with that thing. It’s a frightening thought.”

Hongjun murmured his acknowledgment. The night he had pursued Fei’ao into the city, he had also hesitated to use his saber, afraid he’d end up chopping the city gates of Chang’an in two.

“Can you teach me how to use the heart lamp?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Let me try first.” Hongjun grabbed the jade peacock feather and activated the pentacolor sacred light. He wrapped both arms around Li Jinglong’s sturdy waist, folding one hand over the other as he pressed them to Li Jinglong’s chest. Li Jinglong’s armor clanked, the icy cold metal enclosing the warm and steady beat of his heart inside his body.

The sacred light seeped through Li Jinglong’s chest and trickled into his meridians. Li Jinglong felt his qi and blood race uncomfortably, but the sensation lasted a mere moment before the sacred light retreated. Hongjun could sense the burning glow blossoming in Li Jinglong’s heart, resisting the sacred light’s intrusion. That glow was slowly circulating through all of Li Jinglong’s meridians.

“There it is!” Hongjun said. “Did you feel that?”

Li Jinglong hummed. Ever since their escape from the blood pool, he could sense the heart lamp beginning to protect him. Everything had happened so quickly afterward that he hadn’t had time to test it.

Hongjun kept his hand pressed to Li Jinglong’s chest. “Summon the spiritual power inside you, then try moving the heart lamp along the Hand-Shaoyin heart meridian. Pass it up through your chest and shoulder, and then down into your right hand.”

As he explained, Hongjun drew a finger over Li Jinglong’s armor from the left side of his chest across to his right arm. Li Jinglong was familiar with the meridians of the body from his martial training, but he wanted to be sure. He removed his body armor, then took Hongjun’s right hand and drew it along the same path over his unarmored chest and shoulder. “Like this?”

“Yes.” Following the path, Hongjun’s fingers slid down to Li Jinglong’s right hand where it held the reins. Li Jinglong switched the reins to his left, pressing his broad palm to Hongjun’s and interlacing their fingers. Hongjun’s heart began to pound. Warm light flashed between their hands.

“I think I’ve got it.” Li Jinglong chuckled. “Thanks, Xiao-Shifu.”[7]

"Um…"

Li Jinglong squeezed their interlaced hands, then let go. "I'll make sure to practice diligently."

This was the first time Hongjun had ever interlocked his fingers with another's, and his cheeks bloomed pink. The simple act seemed to stir some unspoken yet complex well of emotion between them.

"T-try it with your sword?" Hongjun suggested.

"It's tied to the saddle," Li Jinglong said. "Hand it to me?"

Hongjun removed the Sword of Wisdom from the horse's saddle as they cantered along. Li Jinglong summoned the power of the heart lamp into his hand again as Hongjun prompted, "Now release it into the sword. You can do it!"

Riding through the night surrounded by over two thousand cavalry, Li Jinglong poured the power of the heart lamp into the Sword of Wisdom, which began to give off a radiant glow. Its brilliance speared out toward the heavens and earth, illuminating their surroundings like a lighthouse in the dark. The Shenwu Guard cried out in shock, while the other exorcists urged their horses faster to catch up.

"Nice going, Chief!"

"Oh my! The chief's got another trick up his sleeve!"

"The chief is glowing!" Hongjun laughed.

Everyone burst out laughing with him; Li Jinglong didn't know whether he should cry or laugh with them. "What's next?" he asked.

"That's all I know how to do," Hongjun said. "It's what Chong Ming taught me. We'll have to figure out the rest together."

"Then it'll have to be enough!" Li Jinglong said. "Let's move out, everyone!"

Their horses whinnied as they charged toward the darkened city of Chang'an. It was a few hours after midnight; dawn had yet to arrive, and the Central Plains were still blanketed under a spangled velvet sky.

Chapter 36:
Yao Overrun Chang'an

THE DEPARTMENT OF EXORCISM emerged dripping from the underground canal within Chang'an's walls. They had retraced Hongjun's path, swimming down through the moat surrounding the city.

"We should seal this thing up," Li Jinglong said. "It's too dangerous to leave it."

Behind him, Hongjun, Mergen, and Qiu Yongsi were all gasping for breath. They had recovered less than half their energy in the cavern earlier, and after the grueling battle in Huaqing Palace, they were exhausted. A-Tai was the only one in decent shape.

"Let's take a break," Li Jinglong said.

The carp yao scampered to the mouth of the tunnel and glanced around. It was drizzling in Chang'an. The raindrops carried the faint stench of carrion.

"What's up with this rain?" the carp yao mused.

Li Jinglong followed him outside and stretched out a hand to catch a few drops. The rainwater was tinged red; he applied a little of the heart lamp's power, and the liquid boiled into steam under its pure white glow.

As everyone else exited the tunnel, Li Jinglong looked at each of them. "How much have you recovered?"

"Half," Mergen said.

Qiu Yongsi said, "Also half."

"Three-tenths," Hongjun said.

"I'm full up," said A-Tai, the picture of calm.

"You've all worked hard," Li Jinglong said. "After this is all over, I'll take you out for some fun. Where does everyone want to go? Pingkang Ward again?"

Hongjun immediately perked up. "You will? Actually, I want…to soak in that pool from earlier."

When Hongjun had fallen into Huaqing Pool, he'd found the water of the hot spring surpassingly comfortable. There were even platters of fruit and iced tea set out beside it—but he hadn't gotten to enjoy it before the others dragged him away.

"Then I'll ask His Majesty later," Li Jinglong said. His hand gave off a gentle white glow as he stuck it out, palm down. Hongjun stacked his hand on Li Jinglong's, and everyone else piled their hands on top.

"Let's go!" Li Jinglong said.

Sword in hand, he led the way to the west gate—their first target. Chang'an was asleep, and silence reigned over the city. Yao energy coiled through the air, emanating from a dark cloud suspended over the imperial palace. The city gate towers were abnormally quiet, despite the presence of armed sentries lined in rows

atop the battlements.

"How can that fox yao stretch her power over the entire city?!" Hongjun found this unbelievable. Even Chong Ming's power could only cover the much smaller Yaojin Palace.

"It's the blood rain," Qiu Yongsi explained.

"Use the oblivion pollen sparingly," Li Jinglong said. "We can't afford to run out."

The sentries at the gate stood dazed under the blood shower. Mergen sprinted forward and loosed a rapid barrage of arrows. A few sentries went down without a cry before the soldiers atop the gate tower noticed and returned fire, shooting a hail of arrows down at the exorcists.

"Take the gate!" Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun raised his light barrier in one hand to block the onslaught, drawing the immortal-slaying knives with the other. He was about to let them fly when Qiu Yongsi yelled, "Yaoguai!"

Two giant, scaly fish breached the water behind them. At the sight of his natural enemy, the carp yao screeched in fright and jumped into Qiu Yongsi's arms. Cradling the carp yao, Qiu Yongsi bolted toward Hongjun, equally terrified.

"You weren't afraid of the fox yao!" A-Tai yelled.

"I don't like the weird-looking ones!" Qiu Yongsi shouted. "Do something!"

Mergen transformed into a great gray wolf and snatched one giant fish up in his jaws. The Duchess of Guo had obviously been expecting them and set up an ambush in the canal below the city gate.

The fish yao guarding the gate were a type called chiru—Li Jinglong recalled them from Di Renjie's book. "Stab them in the gills!" he called. "Hongjun! You go on ahead!"

As they fought the chiru on the road before the city gates, more and more yaoguai sensed their attack and rushed toward their location. Merging his knives into the long saber once again, Hongjun poured his energy into his weapon and swept it in a flat arc, slicing through the iron chains holding up the gate.

Waiting outside the city with the Shenwu Guard, Li Longji heard a series of dull thuds behind the gate.

"They're here!" the emperor shouted. "Soldiers, with us!"

With a deafening *boom*, the chain-operated gate slammed down to bridge the moat. From deeper inside the city, there came a cacophony of roars that could be heard dozens of miles away. As the surrounding framework of the gate also collapsed and smashed into the ground, hundreds of yaoguai charged past the exorcists and out of the city in a cloud of black smoke, like a herd of galloping horses.

"Where did they all come from?!" Hongjun shouted amid the chaos.

"These are all the yao occupying Chang'an!" the gray wolf shouted. "Get up on the sentry tower!"

Hongjun tossed out his grappling hook. A-Tai unleashed a cyclone to sweep him upward, but many of the yaoguai had wings and took to the air, shooting explosive balls of fire from their mouths with piercing shrieks. Mergen leapt up in his wolf form, caught Hongjun, and carried him to the top of the wall. Rolling to land, Mergen changed back into human form and dropped to one knee, drawing his bow and releasing a cascade of arrows.

Hongjun covered the city wall with the sacred light to block the hail of fireballs from the yaoguai with one hand while launching throwing knives with the other. The air over the city wall filled with a whirlwind of arrows and glowing knives as yaoguai were cut down one after another. But their numbers were simply too great; they advanced toward the gate in a mass that blocked the sky itself.

"The Department of Exorcism will take care of the monsters in the sky!" Li Longji shouted. "Men, follow our lead!"

The emperor led the Shenwu Guard into battle, charging through the gate in a valiant attack. The yaoguai in the vanguard were of lower cultivation and quickly fell before the two-thousand-man assault force.

Li Jinglong shouted, "Let's finish this!"

A-Tai sent a cyclone blasting through the airborne yaoguai as Hongjun hefted his saber. He swung it up toward the sky, the force of his strike compressing, rending, and shattering everything in its path. Caught in that wide arc of light that illuminated the city gate below, dozens of flying beasts were cleaved in two in an instant. Blood rained down from above as their wails echoed through the air.

"Follow me!" the gray wolf howled.

The exorcists leapt down from the gate tower and remounted their horses. Li Jinglong summoned the heart lamp into his palm, and the Sword of Wisdom began to glow. As they raced along the main road of the city, the clouds of black energy retreated before its power. Li Longji led the charge, over two thousand soldiers streaming behind him.

Strange beasts flanked the road, numbering in the thousands as they surged from every home and alleyway.

"How are there so many monsters in Chang'an?!" Li Longji shouted.

"Reporting to Your Majesty!" Mergen galloped past Li Longji, stopping a charging boar yao in its tracks with one of his nailhead arrows. "They've been hiding within the city for some time! But they…"

"…aren't very powerful!" A-Tai finished as he shot past on the right, sending two snake yao flying with a wave of his fan.

"We can see that." Li Longji's heart was still racing with adrenaline, but he was reassured by what he saw.

"You can fight them on your own!" Hongjun yelled as he caught up. "Emperor! You have the Ziwei Star's protection—a few little yao should be no problem for you! We're going on ahead!"

Li Longji looked back at him, stunned.

The group broke away from the main avenue, following Li Jinglong to forge a path through the city. Li Jinglong held his sword out across his body as their warhorses galloped through the dark streets.

"Can you see them?" Hongjun asked.

"There are yao everywhere," Qiu Yongsi said. "Strange. Why aren't they attacking?"

The rooftops flanking the West Market were crowded with yao cloaked in black energy. By now, all the exorcists had noticed them.

"There are two possibilities," A-Tai said calmly. "One—they fear death, and don't want to make a rash move because they know they can't defeat us. Two—we were never their targets in the first place."

Mergen loosed an arrow from horseback. The yao in the path of its flight scattered like startled birds. "They're all low-level yao," he concluded. "They're not strong fighters. Look, they're all just watching us."

"Yao aren't like humans," the carp piped up from behind Hongjun. "Humans believe in virtue and justice, the sages and their schools of thought, and adherence to the order of heaven and earth; to their rulers, ancestors, and teachers. Yao don't have these things. They don't believe their sovereign can demand they sacrifice their lives; they obey the yao king out of fear. They'll listen to whoever's strongest."

"So the yao king is weakened?" Li Jinglong understood now. "She doesn't have as much control over them as before."

"The yao king ought to be a black jiao," Qiu Yongsi said. "Why does an eight-tailed fox hold the position now?"

Hongjun recalled what Qing Xiong had said about the yao king before he left the mountain. Everyone seemed to mention this black jiao—but where was he? How was it that they were now facing a fox instead?

"Maybe he ran or was usurped," Li Jinglong said. "How old is your information?"

Everyone conceded that he had a point. Li Jinglong continued, "With all this commotion, if there was another yao king, there's no chance he would stay hidden. Perhaps there was some sort of internal strife, like Zhao Zilong said. Either way, we may find out once we see the fox yao again."

They slowed their horses to a trot as they reached the Xuande Gate, which led into Xingqing Palace. The trills of a pipa could be heard from behind its great doors, an eerie break in the silence of the darkest hours before dawn.

Li Jinglong stared past the gate into Xingqing Palace, where dark plumes of yao energy rose into the air. "Everyone, be ready."

The exorcists raised their spiritual devices. Holding his pentacolor sacred light and his long saber, Hongjun stood at the front of the group. Li Jinglong placed a hand on Hongjun's shoulder and stepped before him. "Don't always rush to the front."

Li Jinglong unsheathed the Sword of Wisdom and took a deep breath.

TWELFTH YEAR OF TIANBAO,
SEVENTEENTH DAY OF THE ELEVENTH MONTH.

Incident: Quash a rebellion and assist the emperor.

Degree of Difficulty: Heaven.

Location: Xingqing Palace.

Person(s) Involved: The Duchess of Guo, Noble Consort Yang, Li Longji.

Case Details: On the evening of the sixteenth day of the eleventh month, the Duchess of Guo revealed her true form as a nine-tailed celestial fox and the yao king hiding in Chang'an for numerous years. After destroying Huaqing Palace and taking Noble Consort Yang hostage, she cast a bewitchment spell over Chang'an and gathered yaoguai with the intent to overthrow the emperor of Great Tang. Rescue the hostage, Noble Consort Yang, and slay the yao king.

Remuneration: The emperor will reward you handsomely!

"Let's go!"

At Li Jinglong's shout, Hongjun swung his saber in two diagonal slashes. Space split open, and a deep cross appeared on the Xuande Gate and its decorative archway. The iron doors, each weighing several thousand pounds, were sliced open like soft tofu and collapsed to the sides with a resounding *crash*.

A woman wearing a long one-piece outer robe sat in the plaza behind the Xuande Gate. The saber glares skimmed the side of her elaborate coiffure, tugging a few dark strands free with a chilly gust of wind. The pipa in her hands fell silent.

"The Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism. Your reputation precedes you," the woman said cheerfully. "You may call me Xuan Yin. We meet again."

"You… You're…" Hongjun was stunned.

This woman was the pipa soloist from the Spring Oriole in Pingkang Ward! Emotion rippled in her lively eyes as she smiled at Hongjun.

"How does my pipa compare to Li Guinian's?" Xuan Yin asked.

Soldiers filled the plaza behind her. All six subdivisions of the imperial guard —the Left and Right Longwu Guards, the Left and Right Shenwu Guards, and the Left and Right Yulin Guards—were present. Every soldier's face was blank as the blood-tinged rain misted down around them. Standing at the head of the Longwu Guard was none other than Li Jinglong's former superior, Hu Sheng.

"You're trying to make us kill our own people." Holding the Sword of Wisdom before him, Li Jinglong stepped forward. "Evil creature, do you think I'll do it or not?"

Xuan Yin tittered. "Commandant Li, your Sword of Wisdom can only break through demonic energy. I am not plagued by inner demons, so its power is useless against me. But I wonder—can you break through my lady's charm spell?"

Xuan Yin ran her fingers over her pipa strings, drawing a resonant trill.

"What's she trying to do?" Hongjun asked.

"Control the imperial guard," Li Jinglong said casually.

A battle cry went up from a thousand throats as the imperial guards raised their weapons and pointed them toward the gate where the exorcists stood, slowly tightening their ranks.

"Miss Xuan Yin," Li Jinglong said, "the Duchess of Guo doesn't know how to utilize talent to its full potential. You should never have been playing in Pingkang Ward. Since the day the imperial guard was established, each division has operated independently. The full guard has never appeared in such neat formation. You should train troops for His Majesty instead, miss."

The exorcists burst into laughter. As Xuan Yin choked with rage, Li Jinglong saw his chance: "Attack!"

A-Tai and Mergen were fastest, unleashing magic-infused projectiles and the seven nailhead arrows the instant Li Jinglong spoke. Xuan Yin's song was interrupted as she went to dodge; unable to summon soldiers to her defense, she leapt up into the air. Li Jinglong and Hongjun surged after her. Hovering in midair, Xuan Yin swung her pipa, and the imperial guard raised their bows and sent a volley of arrows streaking toward them.

Hongjun was reaching for his sacred light to block them when Li Jinglong hauled him over by the collar. "Inside!"

Before Hongjun could react, Li Jinglong had dragged him up the stairs. Li Jinglong shouldered the doors to Xingqing Palace's main hall open and yelled, "I'll leave the rest to you guys!"

Mergen, Qiu Yongsi, and A-Tai shouted their acknowledgment. Xuan Yin blanched and flew after them, but Mergen was still shooting, forcing her to land. If she let them slip by her here, all the effort she had expended bringing the twenty thousand members of the imperial guard under her control would go to waste.

"Li Jinglong!" Xuan Yin shrieked in rage.

The carp yao bounded over, and A-Tai sent him sailing through the air with a wave of his fan. The carp yao yelled, "Lay down your butcher's knives and be absolved—"

"Why do you yell something different every time?!" Qiu Yongsi exclaimed.

The carp yao scattered the sachet of oblivion pollen like a celestial maiden tossing flowers.

As the pollen dispersed across the parade grounds in the gusting wind, the imperial guards began to sneeze and look around in confusion. Hu Sheng was first to recover. "Where am I?!"

Unfortunately, they had a limited amount of oblivion pollen. It spread to about half of the imperial guard, releasing nearly seven thousand men. Hugging his sachet, the carp yao touched down on a rooftop, staggering as he nearly lost his footing. He steadied himself and dashed off deeper into Xingqing Palace.

Xuan Yin plucked her pipa again, but A-Tai had taken advantage of her lapse in attention to perch atop the palace wall with his barbat in hand. He strummed the strings, and the sound waves from their instruments crashed into each other, exploding in the middle of the plaza.

"Can anyone tell me what's going on here?!" Hu Sheng yelled.

Xuan Yin gritted her teeth and unleashed the full power of her pipa, putting more and more urgency into her commands, but with A-Tai interfering, she could no longer bring the pollen-awakened soldiers back under her power. Xuan Yin's hands moved faster and faster in her rendition of "Prince Qin's Battle Song," while A-Tai mercilessly launched into the "Dance of Rainbows and Feathers," personally composed by Li Longji.

Xuan Yin had met her match. Her pipa tune rose and fell, the heavy notes landing like crashes of broken stone and shattered jade, while A-Tai wove through the gaps of her melody with his celestial tones, disrupting Xuan Yin's rhythm.

"Captain Hu Sheng!" Qiu Yongsi shouted. "Tell your subordinates to fall back!"

The competing tunes whipped across the square like dueling tempests, leaving the twenty thousand members of the imperial guard dizzy with their force. Hu Sheng yelled and covered his ears, barely managing to scramble his way over to the exorcists. Mergen nocked an arrow to his bow while Qiu Yongsi clutched his riverscape brush, glancing nervously over at Xuan Yin.

Arcs of light rippled around A-Tai and Xuan Yin as they traded waves of sound. As their battle reached its peak, the notes collided like physical blows in the space between them, setting off an explosion with every contact.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun rushed into Xingqing Palace, both breathing hard.

"Chief, you're so smart…"

"Now's not the time for flattery…"

"I mean it!"

Hongjun followed Li Jinglong past room after room. Li Jinglong had worried they would run across eunuchs and palace maids, but luckily, they didn't encounter a soul. Where was the Duchess of Guo hiding?

"Why aren't you using the heart lamp?"

"Given what the pipa girl said, I suspect they want me to use it." Li Jinglong sprinted past the corridor leading to the side hall, adding, "I don't know why, but it always pays to be careful."

"Wait," Hongjun said. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Xingqing Palace was completely empty. The only sounds were their own footsteps, tapping on the deserted floors.

"Every time you have a bad feeling, I'm the one who ends up getting in trouble," Li Jinglong remarked absently.

Hongjun didn't know what to say to that.

The fox yao had hidden herself somewhere within Xingqing Palace. Outside, dawn was beginning to creep over the horizon. Crimson raindrops pattered down and dripped from the eaves as the once-bustling palace was reduced to deathly stillness. Blood ran sluggishly down the painted columns, walls, and rafters, soaking the window lattices, murals, and lanterns in the dim predawn light and enveloping the chamber they were passing through.

Hongjun reflexively summoned his sacred light. Li Jinglong was about to tell him to relax when a wave of blood surged in on them from all directions. "Look out!"

The tide of blood crashed down, turning the walls into crimson waterfalls. Hongjun covered himself and Li Jinglong with his light shield, but the force of the blood sea swallowed them in an instant, churning with wild force. Li Jinglong pulled Hongjun tight against him with one arm as they were swept off their feet by the current and pushed into the center of the room.

"The heart lamp!"

"This blood is everywhere… I can't…"

Protected by the sacred light, it was as if Li Jinglong and Hongjun huddled inside a translucent cocoon adrift in an ocean of red. More and more blood rushed in, shoving them deeper below the surface of the crimson sea. Li Jinglong projected the heart lamp's power as far as he could, sending beams of light through the sea of blood, but it was powerless against the enormous mass of liquid.

Their shield of light contracted under the pressure of the blood sea until there was no space to move. The two of them were pressed so closely against each other that Hongjun couldn't even straighten his elbows. "You're crushing my arm," he gritted out.

Li Jinglong struggled out of the way, and Hongjun swung his saber. His strike cut through the blood sea, but the liquid quickly flowed together again. Hongjun took shallow breaths. Despite the barrier of sacred light around them, he felt like he was running out of air.

Li Jinglong braced his elbows against the opposite sides of the shield. Tumbling in the blood tide, they couldn't find any footing, floating suspended above the ground.

On the parade grounds outside Xingqing Palace, A-Tai and Xuan Yin's tunes swirled like a raging storm. As "Prince Qin's Battle Song" reached its climax, A-Tai played a sliding note, then dragged his fingers hard across the strings. Every one sounded at once with a resounding *twang*, like a mountain splitting in two. The soldiers on the parade grounds shivered in its wake.

This was their chance!

Qiu Yongsi flicked his brush, and every carved relief on the stone tiles around the Xuande Gate peeled up from the ground. The giant xuanwu tortoise sigil in the center of the parade grounds rose from its resting place and turned with a roar,

knocking imperial guards to the ground. Mergen pivoted in midair and took seven shots in a row, then transformed into the gray wolf and sped toward Xuan Yin down the path the xuanwu tortoise had cleared.

Xuan Yin raised her hand over her pipa strings once again, but A-Tai's last attack had damaged her meridians. She turned and leapt into the air, successfully knocking aside Mergen's arrows—but she couldn't outrun the wolf. Xuan Yin's eyes were wide with fright, but the wolf spared no pity for the fairer sex as he sunk his teeth into her waist. Blood dyed the fur around the wolf's mouth red. With a scream, Xuan Yin shrank into her true form—a jade pipa—nearly breaking Mergen's fangs.

Mergen tossed his head in pain, sending the jade pipa flying. It smashed into the white marble steps and tumbled down with a cascade of crashes before crumbling to dust at the base of the stairs.

With Xuan Yin's death, the effects of her powers faded. Awareness returned to the soldiers one after another.

It was at this point that Li Longji arrived at last. "Where is the imperial guard?!" he demanded. The newly awakened soldiers exchanged looks, but though they shivered at Li Longji's thunderous shout, none of them had the faintest idea what had happened.

"Follow me into Xingqing Palace to rescue the noble consort! Whosoever saves her life will be richly rewarded!"

Chapter 37:
Coming Prepared

IN XINGQING PALACE'S rear hall, Hongjun and Li Jinglong had been squeezed until their bones ached and they felt their organs were about to burst inside their bodies. Hongjun tried to raise his saber again but couldn't summon the strength.

"Chief…"

"Wait," Li Jinglong choked out. "Look—the blood sea is…alive…"

Hongjun couldn't focus on what he was saying. "I'm going to throw up."

Li Jinglong activated the heart lamp to illuminate the blood sea. Wherever the lamp's glow fell upon it, the vivid red of the blood grew fainter, while other areas darkened to a deep crimson. He couldn't tell if it was merely a visual effect of the light, or if the blood sea feared the heart lamp.

"When I tell you…use all the strength you have to expand the light barrier…"

Hongjun hissed out the last bit of air in his lungs; Li Jinglong's face was going purple, his vision beginning to blur in the tiny space into which they'd been crushed. Their chests were pressed together while the blood sea battered the shield of sacred light, squeezing it tighter and tighter.

"Are you…ready?"

Hongjun could no longer speak. Li Jinglong called on every ounce of willpower to draw in a deep breath. His chest began to glow.

It was just as Li Jinglong hoped: Everywhere the light of the heart lamp touched, a strange transformation occurred in the blood sea, and the darker areas shrank back in retreat. Li Jinglong summoned the power of the heart lamp into both hands, white light radiating from his palms to illuminate the blood sea in two directions at once. As the light spread, the darker region slowly gathered together to avoid the light's touch, coalescing behind Li Jinglong's back.

"Now!" Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun used the last of his strength to expand the pentacolor sacred light. Bright beams, tinged five different hues as if shining through a crystal, shot in all directions and carved a space in the middle of the blood sea like the god Pangu dividing heaven and earth from the primordial chaos. But Hongjun's energy was already waning; he opened a space only a few feet on all sides before the blood sea began to bear back down on him with a furious howl.

Just as the sacred light was about to go out entirely, Li Jinglong unsheathed the Sword of Wisdom on his back, pushed Hongjun aside, and leapt out of the light barrier's protective radius, stabbing toward the dark mass in the liquid.

Light burst from the Sword of Wisdom as black smoke erupted within the sea of blood. The instant the sword made contact, the blood sea exploded, boiling, then crashed down, roaring in his ears.

Suddenly no longer suspended, Hongjun crumpled to the ground and coughed up a mouthful of coppery-sweet blood. He scrambled to push himself upright, catching sight of Li Jinglong holding the Sword of Wisdom's hilt in both hands as the last bit of black smoke orbiting its blade burned out beneath its radiant glow. A mournful wail came from the final wisp, as if some trapped spirit had been freed from its confines. Having lost its shape, the blood sea dispersed in all directions in a great tidal wave.

Hongjun staggered to his feet, panting for breath. Li Jinglong, too, appeared on the verge of collapse; Hongjun grabbed his arm, steadying him.

"Come on!" Li Jinglong turned away. "She can't be far!"

Dark clouds gathered over the astronomical observatory, but the blood rain no longer fell.

Yang Yuhuan lay unconscious in the center of the open-air observatory. The seven-tailed fox stood over her with her head lowered. Waves of white light streamed from her mouth and lapped at Yang Yuhuan's supine body.

Grasping his saber, Hongjun crept up the observatory steps.

The fox's injured tail had yet to heal; blood seeped from the wound. As Hongjun drew closer, he discovered that he'd gotten it wrong. The energy of their mysterious connection wasn't moving from the fox yao to Yang Yuhuan—it was emanating from Yang Yuhuan's body into the seven-tailed fox yao's mouth. It enveloped the fox's entire body, coalesced into a pillar of light, and shot up into the sky.

"Fox yao, let her go." Hongjun raised his saber.

The fox yao's head whipped around to look at Hongjun, and she let out a roar, crouching to pounce. Hongjun summoned his light barrier.

As Hongjun spoke, Li Jinglong had climbed up and hidden behind one of the stone balustrades of the observatory. He gripped the Sword of Wisdom, watching the fox yao's every move.

The fox yao shook as she spoke. "You killed my child?"

"That sea of blood was your child?" Hongjun asked slowly. "Then yes, I vanquished it."

Every hair on the fox yao's body stood on end. "So be it, son of Kong Xuan. You must be here on behalf of those three feathered brutes. It no longer matters whose bastard you are!"

Hongjun's voice carried an air of majesty as he roared, "Identify yourself!"

The fox yao sneered as she abandoned Noble Consort Yang's unconscious body and stalked toward Hongjun.

At the same time, the carp yao was crawling up the other side of the observatory, mouth gaping open. Li Jinglong gestured sharply at him to stop where he was. Confused, the carp yao nevertheless nodded in agreement.

“My real name is Wu Qiyu. Baxia, Suanni, Yazi…” the fox yao trailed off. “Now, counting the blood sea Xue Luo, how many of my children have you killed?” The fox yao’s voice turned mournful. “Kong Xuan killed my younger sister, and now his son is just as cruel. We are fellow members of the yao race—why must we turn on each other like this?!”

“Those three yaoguai…were also your children?” Hongjun found it inconceivable.

“To be more precise, they were the sons of the dragon of Great Tang.” The fox yao’s voice went soft and dangerous. “Do you know why Her Grace the noble consort has always been barren?”

Hongjun didn’t know what to say. In the shadows, Li Jinglong felt a chill run up his spine.

“She was fated to have three children,” Wu Qiyu continued. “But with her constitution, she was never fit to bear human heirs. Unlike your father… Your mother must have been human, too, to have borne an evil thing like you.”

Li Jinglong’s pupils contracted into pinpricks.

Hongjun’s chest heaved. “Are you the one who killed my father?”

Wu Qiyu lowered her head and stared at Hongjun, eyes roiling with dark smoke as if a black flame burned inside her pupils. She said quietly, “I see it… I see… It was you all along…”

Hongjun locked eyes with the fox yao and suddenly felt as if he’d been struck by lightning, thrown back into his own memories.

“Di Renjie, he’s the only child I have…”

A man had one arm around his young wife and led a small child with the other, stumbling into the crumbling main hall of the Department of Exorcism.

The young Hongjun stared wide-eyed at everything around him. A man holding the Sword of Wisdom hung suspended in midair, haloed in golden light and clad in a suit of armor of the same hue. His father and dying mother knelt down before him.

Silhouetted by the light, the golden man raised the sword—

“Hongjun!” Li Jinglong’s sharp cry dragged Hongjun back to the present. Radiating light, the Sword of Wisdom swept across Hongjun’s field of vision. Hongjun stumbled back in fright and fell to the ground.

Li Jinglong turned, gripping the Sword of Wisdom’s hilt with both hands, and stepped in front of Hongjun to face the fox yao. “Wu Qiyu, where is the true yao king?! You will meet your end today—don’t think for a second you’ll make it out of Chang’an!”

“The true yao king?” The fox yao cackled. “Do you mean that useless black jiao?! He’s long gone. All he’s capable of is lying low and submitting to his humiliation. I am the yao king now!” The fox yao’s shrill laughter echoed through the observatory. “Great Tang is on its last legs! Just you wait, Li Jinglong! All of you…and especially *you*…”

The fox yao looked past Li Jinglong and met Hongjun's eyes. She bit out, "Kong Xuan killed my dear Yu Zaoyun. I thought to take his son's life to repay his debt, but I never thought it would be you. I sincerely hope you survive—because from today onward, you'll suffer the fire of Mara as it incinerates everything in its path, living a life worse than death…and you'll never…*never* be freed!"

The rage in Hongjun's heart threatened to burst the vessel of his chest under the fox yao's baleful gaze. "Who killed my parents?!"

Li Jinglong raised a hand. White light burst from his palm and blocked the fox yao's eyes; Hongjun calmed in an instant.

"I… I…" Hongjun's voice trembled.

"I was the one who killed your children," Li Jinglong said, voice low. "It has nothing to do with Hongjun or any of my other colleagues. Even if I'm to be burned in the fires of hell for it, that punishment is mine to bear! Fox yao! After all the evil you've done, the first to go to hell will be you!"

Li Jinglong raised the Sword of Wisdom and charged toward the fox yao without an ounce of fear or hesitation.

The seven-tailed fox howled and slashed at Li Jinglong with sharp claws. Hongjun shook himself out of his stupor and raised his light shield to block the fox's strike.

As the sound of their blows reverberated through the air, the carp yao bounded across the observatory platform. "Got her!"

While Li Jinglong and Hongjun kept the fox yao busy, the carp yao put his arms around Yang Yuhuan's neck, grabbed a pinch of oblivion pollen, and stuffed it up her nostrils. Yang Yuhuan was only unconscious; as soon as the pollen took effect, she sneezed and opened teary eyes to find that her savior was a slack-jawed carp.

"How lovely," the carp yao said. He may not have been human, but he could still appreciate Yang Yuhuan's paper-fine skin and doll-like face.

Yang Yuhuan looked into the carp yao's eyes in confusion.

"Beautiful lady, are you all right?" the carp yao asked with concern.

The noble consort shrieked in fear. "Why does this carp know how to talk?! Monster! Monster!" Terrified, she struggled to her feet.

Hopes dashed, the carp yao said placatingly, "Okay, okay, you're right! I'm a monster."

"Get her out of here!" Li Jinglong yelled.

"Come with me?" the carp yao offered.

Wu Qiyu was still fending off Hongjun and Li Jinglong. When she heard the noble consort's screams, she turned and roared, "Yu-er!"

In her moment of distraction, Hongjun shoved his left hand forward with the sacred light and used his right to swing his saber in a great upward arc from his toes to the crown of his head. The saber glare hurtled toward the fox yao like the bright crescent moon; Wu Qiyu dodged too late and lost another tail.

Fresh blood spurted from the wound. She spun around and lunged at Hongjun. “I’ll kill you first!”

Wu Qiyu’s strike knocked Hongjun right off the edge of the observatory. Li Jinglong abandoned the Sword of Wisdom and dove to catch Hongjun’s hand, leaving both of them dangling over the balustrade. The fox yao breathed a plume of fire, incinerating the wooden pillars around the observatory platform’s edge.

Hongjun screamed as both he and Li Jinglong plummeted toward the ground below.

Yet in the next breath, they landed on something soft and heard Mergen’s voice. “We’re here!”

The gray wolf leapt up and deposited Li Jinglong and Hongjun back atop the observatory platform, shifting into human form as Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai bounded up the stairs. The members of the Department of Exorcism, assembled once again, fell into formation, encircling the bloodied Wu Qiyu.

“Fox yao, where is the black jiao?” Qiu Yongsi swept his brush through the air. “Surrender him. He belongs at the bottom of the Dragon-Quelling Tower!”

“Fox yao!” Mergen drew an arrow and nocked it to his bowstring, standing tall atop the northwest corner of the observatory platform. “What did you do with the white deer?!”

Li Jinglong started in surprise.

“I see you’ve all come for your own reasons,” Wu Qiyu scoffed. “Kong Xuan’s death; the jiao that escaped the Dragon-Quelling Tower; the white deer who is guardian of dreams… But I’d like to see you try and kill me tonight!”

“Your Majesty!”

“Your Majesty—!”

Li Longji strode up the steps of the observatory, imperial sword in hand. Imperial guards packed themselves into the area around the observatory, and his personal guards fell to one knee in neat ranks behind the emperor, raising their bows to take aim at the fox yao in the center of the platform.

“Your Majesty!” Yang Yuhuan cried, dashing past the carp yao to throw herself into Li Longji’s arms.

“Yu-er…” Wu Qiyu sobbed. “Yu-er…don’t you know? If Jiejie held out a bit longer, until the sun rose, you would…”

Perplexed, Yang Yuhuan looked from Li Longji to Wu Qiyu. “Dajie?”

Tears spilled from Wu Qiyu’s large eyes and splashed to the ground.

The exorcists watched the fox yao warily. Li Jinglong sensed something amiss, but he couldn’t say what. “Fox yao! What have you done to the noble consort?!”

Li Longji raised a hand and signaled for Yang Yuhuan to stay where she was. He slowly advanced until he was no more than ten paces from Wu Qiyu, then spoke: “Fox yao, whence did you come? Why bring turmoil to the land of Great Tang?”

“Your Duchess of Guo is long dead, Li Longji!” she hissed.

“Insolence!” the soldiers shouted upon hearing Wu Qiyu address the emperor by name.

“While you were busy tasting every delicacy under the sun, did you ever spare a thought for the lives taken by your hand?” Wu Qiyu asked with a bitter smile. “Have you humans ever felt the slightest compassion for us yao? When you ordered my children burned alive, did you hesitate for even a second?! Did you not see those flames? They were the accumulation of all my children’s resentment and malign energy. What other reason do I need to destroy your empire of Great Tang?!”

“So it is true that monsters and demons are not our kin, and therefore must be of a different mind,” Li Longji said grimly. “You will never be truly human! Men, kill it!”

“Today we shall see what the ordained Son of Heaven is truly capable of!” Wu Qiyu roared.

“Your Majesty, look out!” Li Jinglong cried.

The fox yao lunged toward Li Longji. None of his subjects were close enough to help; as the others rushed forward, Li Longji raised the imperial sword before his chest. Golden light shone from the blade, forming a barrier that sent the fox yao flying.

Cries of “Long live His Majesty” rang through the air. The fox yao panted, eyes wide as she stared at Li Longji.

“This is your end!” Li Longji said, his chest also heaving. “Surrender now, and we’ll leave you an intact corpse to bury!”

Hongjun had hoped to leave Wu Qiyu alive so they could question her; she must know a great deal after occupying Chang’an for decades. As if sensing his unvoiced protest, Li Jinglong said, “Show no mercy. As long as we’re alive, the truth will out—you can’t do anything if you’re dead.”

Everyone nodded in solemn agreement, so Hongjun had no choice but to concede. The fox yao let out a shrill peal of laughter and roared, “Come then!”

As the fox yao shouted, she grew larger still. The exorcists needed no orders; they all advanced at once. Hongjun brandished his saber, Li Jinglong shot rays of light from his sword, Mergen released his seven nailhead arrows, and Qiu Yongsi drew his brush through the air.

Light flared and collided atop the observatory platform. The fox yao lost another tail as her eyes shot a carpet of black flames across the ground. Li Jinglong pressed forward, unflinching, and the flames snuffed out before the blade of his glowing sword.

Qiu Yongsi swept his riverscape brush in a half circle; the constellations carved on the horizontal beams and the dragons twining around the carved balustrades shivered to life and rushed toward the fox yao. Mergen loosed all seven of his nailhead arrows, then shifted into his gray wolf form and sprang toward the fox yao’s back.

The fox yao screamed in pain, blasting fire from her mouth in all directions. An icy cyclone swirled toward her to fend off the flames, while Hongjun leapt into the air; he blocked one blow with his sacred light, then whirled and chopped down with his saber. Another tail fell bleeding to the ground.

"Three to go!" Hongjun yelled.

After losing one tail after another, the fox yao was now standing in a pool of blood, her spiritual energy rapidly dwindling. As Hongjun watched her growing weaker and weaker, his conviction began to falter.

The piercing screech of a bird split the air above their heads.

The dark clouds broke apart to reveal the brilliant rays of the morning sun. Bathed in dawn's golden glow, a great peng spread its wings, over a hundred feet from tip to tip. It cried out once again, circling above them, and dove.

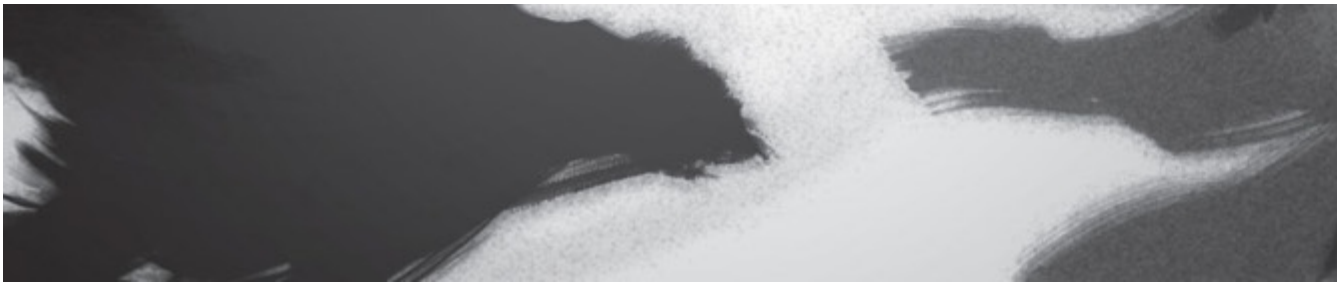
In the gale kicked up by the great peng's gleaming wings, a legion of falcons, hawks, condors, and other raptors streamed toward Xingqing Palace's astronomical observatory like a dark-winged tide. The fox yao turned to run, charging toward Li Jinglong. Holding the Sword of Wisdom, Li Jinglong didn't flinch; he stood firm and sank its blade into her neck.

The fox yao wailed and stumbled backward. Li Jinglong had raised a hand to order everyone to protect the emperor when the golden-winged great peng swooped over the observatory platform with its talons outstretched and hoisted the fox yao into the air, climbing high into the clouds.

A thousand voices of the soldiers below cried out at once; even Li Longji blanched. The golden-winged peng tossed the fox yao into the air, and countless birds of prey swarmed her, forming a mass that blocked out the sky. Her screams echoed across the horizon as she was reduced to a cloud of bloody mist.

The flock scattered, and the golden-winged peng shrieked once more before wheeling away into the clouds. The birds followed, disappearing behind the cloudbank like a majestic army returning home in triumph.

The entire thing had happened so fast that it was a moment more before the torn-up clumps of fur and blood reached them, raining down around the observatory in a shower of filthy red. Everyone stood frozen, faces painted with blood. Hongjun reached out one hand and caught a tuft of pale fur in his palm.



Li Jinglong swayed on his feet, sagging against the balustrade as he propped himself up with the Sword of Wisdom. He heaved a long sigh.

"Chief, look," Qiu Yongsi muttered.

The sun was cresting the horizon, illuminating the astronomical observatory with its early rays. The morning bell had yet to toll, but the yao energy was already dispersing from Chang'an under the warm morning light. Sensing Wu Qiyu's death, the thousands of yaoguai occupying the city had begun to flee through its eight gates in a massive exodus.

The exorcists paused, gazing out over the city. The ancient capital looked renewed in the light of day.

"Chief, what do you think?" A-Tai smiled.

"This was…quite the battle," Li Jinglong said, utterly spent. He didn't want to think about a single thing. He glanced over at Hongjun and patted his head, but Hongjun was looking off into the distance, where the golden-winged peng had departed. He'd never expected Qing Xiong to show up at a time like this, and he suddenly missed Qing Xiong and Chong Ming like nothing else.

His eyes stung, but when he turned to Li Jinglong, it was with a smile.

Chapter 38:
Prince of Tang

AFTER A DAY and night of rest, the exorcists were summoned to the sleeping quarters of Xingqing Palace, where Yang Yuhuan was beginning to wake from her long slumber.

"Do you feel better?" Hongjun asked. He had changed into a set of azure combat robes. Sitting beside her bed, he was as beautiful as fine jade, more handsome than ever. He held two cool fingers against Yang Yuhuan's neck, the jade peacock feather pulsing with light as its power circulated through Yang Yuhuan's body.

The exorcists still feared the Duchess of Guo had done her some harm. In that chaotic final battle, the fox yao had hinted at much but made nothing clear, leaving a pile of unsolved riddles in her wake.

Hongjun turned to Li Jinglong and the others, who were waiting at the foot of the bed. "I don't sense any yao energy."

Everyone let out a breath of relief. Li Longji said, "Guozhong is in Hebei. We must carefully document what happened and give him a proper explanation."

Twin streams of tears rolled down Yang Yuhuan's cheeks as she tried to recall all that had occurred. "Where…where is Dajie?"

"What do you remember?" Hongjun handed a glass bowl to a eunuch. "Pour the medicine in here."

Yang Yuhuan could only recall fragments of that night. She knew she had met a great gray fox yao and had a long dream, but the shards of her memory weren't enough to piece together a cohesive picture.

"It's probably the oblivion pollen," Li Jinglong said to Li Longji.

"I remember a carp saved my life." Yang Yuhuan gasped in shock. "Where is that fish?"

Everyone fell silent. Li Longji had declared whoever saved Yang Yuhuan would be bestowed a noble title and official position, only for Yang Yuhuan to identify a hairy-legged carp as her savior. It was all rather awkward.

"That fish is my good friend, Zhao Zilong," Hongjun said with a smile. "I'll introduce you sometime. Come, drink your medicine. You'll feel better after you take it."

Hongjun held the glass bowl carefully between his hands as Li Longji stepped closer and helped Yang Yuhuan sit up. But as Hongjun stepped forward, Yang Yuhuan stared at him in shock.

Hongjun looked back, puzzled.

Yang Yuhuan saw that Hongjun was graceful and handsome, with red lips and white teeth, brows dark as umber, and bright, sparkling eyes that seemed to hold the promise of a smile. He had a high-bridged nose and fair skin, and was cradling the

medicine bowl with familiar slender fingers.

"You… Your surname is Kong?" Yang Yuhuan asked. "Who is Kong Xuan to you?"

The room went silent. Hongjun's hands trembled, and he nearly spilled the medicine. In a voice of forced calm, he asked, "You knew my father?"

"You're Kong Xuan's son!" Yang Yuhuan grabbed Hongjun's wrist. "How are your parents?"

"Beloved," Li Longji interjected, "you need your rest. You can discuss these things later."

Hongjun was still in shock. He looked between Yang Yuhuan and Li Longji.

Yang Yuhuan turned to the emperor. "But Doctor Kong, Your Majesty! Don't you remember? Sixteen years ago, when this consort was afflicted with a strange ailment, Doctor Kong was the one who saved me."

Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun. All was silent for a moment. Then Li Longji said, "We vaguely recall this person. Mao-er mentioned him once…hmm."

As Li Longji hesitated, Yang Yuhuan smiled at Hongjun. "Your mother is Jia Yuze, right? Are your parents well?"

"They passed a long time ago," Hongjun said softly.

Yang Yuhuan looked at him, eyes wide with surprise.

Li Jinglong broke the silence: "All the people of the land are His Majesty's subjects; it is their duty to share the emperor and noble consort's burdens. Hongjun, Her Grace is tired. Let her get some rest."

Li Jinglong knew Li Longji was reluctant to speak about the past. After all, Yang Yuhuan had once been his daughter-in-law, and their relationship strained the limits of propriety.

As Li Jinglong ushered him out the door, Hongjun looked back at the noble consort. "We can talk once you're better."

Li Longji nodded and dismissed them from the room.

After removing to the side hall, the exorcists let out a collective sigh of relief. Fortunately, Xingqing Palace hadn't been *completely* destroyed in their battle last night; instead of going home, the exorcists had passed out in the palace. When they woke, they had a meal, a bath, and a change of clothes, and beneath the afternoon sun, Li Longji granted them special permission to rest and await summons in the tea room while he attended court—someone had to handle the aftermath of the past few days' events.

The emperor had taken Li Jinglong with him to meet with representatives from the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, the Ministry of Justice, and the captain of the imperial guard. Only now was Li Jinglong afforded a chance to rest.

"Thankfully the chaos last night was mostly confined to the palace," Li Jinglong said. "We have things under control for now, and most of the citizens of Chang'an have no idea what happened."

“As for the ones who know more than they should, we can just give them some oblivion pollen,” Qiu Yongsi said with a smile.

“But we don’t know where that golden-winged peng came from,” Mergen said. “It was like a deity from the heavens.”

The carp yao was slumped over, half asleep at Hongjun’s feet, but at this, he started and cast Hongjun a look. Hongjun coughed awkwardly, but fortunately, no one seemed to notice his odd behavior as they marveled over the bird’s appearance.

The golden-winged great peng was a divine bird of legend, revered among Great Tang’s people. After discussing at length, the others concluded the bird must have once been the guardian of the Tang dynasty that left when the fox yao occupied Chang’an. Perhaps it had returned to protect Great Tang because it was moved by the Department of Exorcism’s efforts.

Could this be true? Hongjun had never heard anything about Qing Xiong having such a grand occupation as a guardian of the dynasty. It seemed even yao could have good or bad reputations.

Li Longji had yet to dismiss them from the palace that evening. After enjoying a meal bestowed by the emperor, a eunuch summoned them to Gold Blossom’s Fall for an imperial audience. Holding lanterns to light the way, the group headed for the side hall.

Now that the season had turned to early winter, the hundred-year-old ginkgo tree in Gold Blossom’s Fall stretched its bare branches to the sky in the center of the pond. An enormous folding screen had again been set out in the courtyard, this one bearing a snowy white landscape. A figure obscured behind the screen plucked the strings of a qin, its cascading notes drifting toward them like a burbling spring in a field of fresh snow, creating a refreshing atmosphere.

The five of them sat in the same place Li Jinglong and Hongjun had occupied last time. Qiu Yongsi and Mergen were still debating who would win if the golden-winged great peng and the black jiao got into a fight. Before long, a voice called from outside, “The crown prince has arrived—”

Li Jinglong hadn’t expected the crown prince to join this audience. He hurriedly got to his feet to welcome the newcomer.

The crown prince was a tall and thin man in his middle age, with the tanned complexion of a soldier. He patted Li Jinglong on the shoulder with a smile. “Jinglong.”

“Your Highness!” Li Jinglong exclaimed, overjoyed. When the conniving chancellor Li Linfu was in power, the current crown prince, Li Heng, had been shoved to the fringes of the court and sent to oversee the distant northwestern frontier. Li Jinglong and the prince had met on several occasions before Li Heng left the capital. Li Jinglong’s squadron in the Longwu Guard had often accompanied Li Heng on hunting expeditions to Mount Li, and Li Jinglong greatly admired Li Heng’s character and abilities. In turn, Li Heng had been left with a strong impression of the young man who had exhausted his family’s wealth to purchase a single sword. Li Jinglong had at one point even considered following Li Heng to

fight in the northwest.

Unfortunately, Li Heng had made a hasty departure from Chang'an for his own safety before he and Li Jinglong had forged any deeper connection. When Li Linfu's manipulations were exposed last year, however, Li Heng had finally rid himself of his greatest obstacle. With one less enemy, he was able to prove himself at long last, and Li Longji granted him the position of crown prince and summoned him back to Chang'an.

"Oh? Who's this handsome lad?" Spotting Hongjun behind Li Jinglong, Li Heng gave him a smile. "He's outshining all of us!"

"The Prince of Di has arrived—

"The Prince of Shou has arrived—"

Li Yan, the Prince of Di, and Li Mao, the Prince of Shou, walked in side by side. The exorcists saluted respectfully. Li Mao resembled his late mother, Benevolent Consort Wu, who was the emperor's favorite before her death—he had a handsome face, but his looks were on the softer side. Li Yan, meanwhile, had the look of a martial artist, and a faint hint of dissatisfaction seemed to hover in the crease between his brows.

"Father summoned us to acquaint ourselves with Jinglong," Li Yan said with a smile. "Blissful in my ignorance, I slept entirely through these earth-shattering events."

"Your Highnesses are protected by the power of the imperial dragon," Li Jinglong said without missing a beat. "Ordinary evils can do you no harm."

Everyone took their seats. Hongjun examined the crown prince and saw that he was wearing a string of Hetian jade beads around his wrist. They were the creamy white of mutton fat, perfectly identical in size, and gave off a soft, familiar shine. Hongjun began, "Your beads are just like—"

Studying his expression, Li Heng said with a smile, "Do you like them? They're yours."

He removed the string of beads and told a servant to hand them to Hongjun. Li Jinglong was greatly moved. Hongjun began to wave a hand in protest, but Li Jinglong couldn't allow him to reject an imperial gift. He said to Hongjun, "Thank His Highness for his favor."

Li Heng's jade bracelet was known as the Divine Tears of Tian Shan. It was the most precious treasure of the Karluks, which they had offered as tribute when they became a vassal state of Great Tang following Li Heng and Gao Xianzhi's victory in the region of Jetisu, far to the west, a decade ago. It was Li Heng's most beloved treasure and never left his wrist.

Hongjun swallowed the rest of his sentence—*just like the marbles I used to play with when I was little.* He accepted the beads with both hands and quickly said, "Thank you."

The princes chatted among themselves as they waited. Each had a distinctive personality, and overhearing their conversation, it was apparent they hadn't seen each other in some time. Even so, they were unanimous in treating Li Heng as their

leader; whenever Li Heng spoke, the others fell silent to listen. Hongjun couldn't help but recall something the Duchess of Guo had said before her death. If Yang Yuhuan had borne the emperor heirs, would these young princes be sitting here with them too?

After defeating the fox yao, Qiu Yongsi had pondered what she might have meant. Although he couldn't say exactly what spell she had used, it must have been some sinister technique that caused all three of Yang Yuhuan's pregnancies with Li Longji to fail to produce healthy children. Li Jinglong's own guess was that the Duchess of Guo hadn't wished Yang Yuhuan to bear any imperial heirs, afraid it would introduce additional variables into her plan.

Whatever the truth of the matter, all of it had become an eternal secret upon the fox yao's death. Yet at the same time, it was thanks to the duchess's sabotage of her sister that Li Heng's position as crown prince was still secure.

"Father is still discussing business with his ministers," Li Heng said with a smile. "Jinglong, tell us—what happened that night?"

Li Jinglong began to tell the whole tale from the start, beginning with the imperial examination case, of which the princes had yet to be informed. Midway through, Li Longji arrived. The emperor waved everyone back to their seats when they attempted to rise and settled down to hear the rest of Li Jinglong's account.

When he finished the telling, the princes all wore looks of shock.

"This…" Li Heng turned to his father. "I had no idea we were in such danger all this time!"

"Evil creatures overran the city and caused mayhem," Qiu Yongsi said, "but the heavens have protected our Great Tang. In the final moment, the golden-winged great peng descended from the heavens. This is a sign of good fortune's return to our capital."

Li Longji sighed deeply. "This is true. We saw the great peng with our own eyes."

Hongjun reflected that they were lucky it hadn't been Chong Ming who appeared. Otherwise, they'd have spent a good three days just putting out the fires.

Li Heng and the other princes nodded, but they still wore looks of befuddlement. It was clear they thought the whole tale was nonsense—but if Li Longji believed the story, they had little choice but to go along with it too.

After reliving the whole affair, Li Longji appeared more exhausted than when he'd arrived. Summoning the last reserves of his energy, he said, "In the end, it was a carp that saved the noble consort."

"A carp," Li Yan echoed. He and Li Mao still thought these people were pulling their leg, and they both nodded absently.

"A carp—not bad," Li Mao added.

"A good fish," Li Heng concurred. After all this talk of fox yao, ao fish, and countless monsters, he had absolutely no idea what else he was supposed to say.

"Where is the fish?" Li Longji inquired.

“Zhao Zilong!” Hongjun turned and called for him. “They’re asking for you!”

The carp yao poked his head out from behind the table, mouth opening and closing as he stared at the string of lustrous white beads Hongjun had placed atop it. He looked up at the princes, and the entirety of Gold Blossom’s Fall went silent.

“I merely came across an injustice and did what was in my power to stop it,” the carp yao said. “Please, you’re too kind.”

The three princes yelped in surprise and knocked their teacups from their tables in a panic, looking around for the guards. Li Longji burst into laughter. “So, do you believe us?”

Li Heng’s heart was still thundering in his chest as he glanced down at the carp yao. He quickly recovered his calm and nodded. “I do now!”

“Before the Xuande Gate, we promised that whosoever saved the noble consort would be richly rewarded,” Li Longji said, regarding the carp yao. “What do you desire? Tell us.”

The carp yao suddenly realized that there was indeed one thing he wanted very much. “Your Majesty, I’ve no need of an official title. After all, it would be odd for a carp to have a say in government. I have only one request: Your Majesty, I had a benefactor, a Buddhist monk who has now passed. I’ve heard that his cremated remains are kept in Xingjiao Temple. May I have a relic from these remains as a memento?”

“Consider it done.” Li Longji turned to Li Heng. “In a few days, head over to the temple and handle the procedures.”

Li Heng wiped sweat from his brow with his sleeve and nodded. “Of course.”

Li Yan and Li Mao watched the carp with fear in their eyes, but the carp yao simply dipped his head into Hongjun’s teacup and took a few sips. He was plenty used to these kinds of looks from humans and merely scooted back under the table after a moment and lay down at Hongjun’s feet.

“Of course,” Li Longji continued, “Jinglong’s achievements in vanquishing the yao cannot be understated. As of tomorrow, every member of the Department of Exorcism will be rewarded. We shall also grant you a tract of land; you may choose it yourself when the time comes.”

Li Jinglong hastily bowed and thanked the emperor for his favor.

The emperor turned to Li Heng. “The Department of Exorcism was originally under Guozhong’s supervision. Starting tonight, it will be under yours.”

Everyone could sense that, after witnessing the exorcists’ extraordinary abilities, Li Longji felt ill at ease leaving the department in the hands of someone outside his own family. If he wished to ensure that this unconventional department served the imperial family exclusively, he had to keep control within the imperial Li clan. The emperor wouldn’t sleep well at night until he handed the reins over to the crown prince.

“There is one more question I wish to ask,” Li Heng said. “Jinglong, are there still yao in Chang’an? And if so, how many?”

Li Jinglong thought for a moment. “The vast majority are gone, but I can’t say for certain whether some few still lurk in the city.”

The exorcists exchanged glances—they had split up and combed the city yesterday, and had discussed the matter in the observatory last night. Chang’an no longer had a dark haze hanging over it, as it had before. After the yao king’s death, her lackeys had scattered and fled.

“The return of the great peng is a strong piece of evidence,” Mergen added. “Although we don’t know where it’s gone, there’s unlikely to be another disturbance in the near future.”

“We see.” Li Longji nodded and said, “Daci’en Temple contains a painting of a garuda, a divine bird and guardian deity similar to the great peng that drives away evil. Since it has returned, we have no need to worry. All right, that settles it.”

Li Longji was uninterested in keeping them longer, clearly in a hurry to check on Yang Yuhuan. The princes and exorcists rose to see him out. After the emperor departed, Li Jinglong spoke with the princes a bit longer on various topics. Seeing that everyone’s attention was flagging, Li Heng was the first to suggest they conclude the gathering there.

As they left Gold Blossom’s Fall, Li Heng personally saw Li Jinglong and his subordinates to the main hall of Xingqing Palace. It had rained the night before, and the evening sky was washed clean, glittering with brilliant stars. The Milky Way snaked across the heavens, casting its light on the land below. The atmosphere over Chang’an had changed palpably after the fox yao was slain.

“Your Highness.” Li Jinglong turned to the prince. “The Department of Exorcism may possess supernatural abilities, but we may not harm ordinary humans who know nothing of spiritual techniques. I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” Li Heng said with a smile. “Father cautioned me about this today. I shall never require you to take part in assassinations or other base business of that sort. I would far rather the keen blade that is the Department of Exorcism need never be unsheathed again.”

“That is my hope as well,” Li Jinglong replied, placid.

Li Jinglong and Li Heng exchanged bows, having come to a tacit understanding: Li Jinglong and his Department of Exorcism would remain loyal to the future emperor of Great Tang, while the crown prince would remain grateful toward them for saving his family. Each went their separate way as they departed the parade grounds.

“It really does feel different without the yao energy,” Hongjun remarked with a smile.

“It’s strange,” Mergen said, “but the night sky right now looks just like it does over the plains.”

The carp yao spoke up from behind Hongjun. “While Chang’an was shrouded in yao energy, the stars were dim, the guests overtaking the hosts, and war loomed on the horizon. Now that the yao king has perished, the stars’ light shines brighter.”

They were leaving the parade grounds through the Meridian Gate when Mergen drew in a breath of fresh air and said, “We still don’t know where the black jiao has gone.”

Qiu Yongsi gave Mergen a look. This little interaction didn’t escape Li Jinglong’s notice. “What is it?” he asked.

“We’ll tell you in a few days,” Qiu Yongsi said with a smile. “We’ve got some thinking to do.”

Li Jinglong nodded and didn’t press them. As they passed through the gate, a carriage came to a stop before them. Li Longji himself stepped out.

“Your Majesty?!” Li Jinglong was shocked.

“Walk with us,” Li Longji said. “Kong Hongjun, the noble consort has a few questions for you.”

Everyone else tactfully left the palace as Li Longji led Li Jinglong toward the square outside the Meridian Gate. Hongjun sent the carp yao back with the others and climbed into the carriage where Yang Yuhuan was waiting absently, wrapped in a voluminous cloak, with a brazier burning for extra warmth. She gave Hongjun a small smile when he came in.

“His Majesty doesn’t like me to talk about the past,” Yang Yuhuan said in her soft voice. “Listen to what I have to tell you, but you must not speak of it often.”

“Why not? I was going to ask—”

Yang Yuhuan chuckled. “You grew up quite sheltered from the world, didn’t you?” She drew a finger along the gash on Hongjun’s ear and asked, “What happened here? How did you get hurt?”

Hongjun tilted his head and scratched the edge of his injured ear. “It’s nothing. I always got bumps and bruises when I was a kid—this is just a scratch.”

Yang Yuhuan sighed and began to question Hongjun about his family. After Hongjun sketched the general details, Yang Yuhuan said with some astonishment, “So you spent twelve years on the mountain after Yuze and Doctor Kong passed away.”

“What were my parents like?” Hongjun had no memories of his birth parents and was deeply curious.

“A match made in heaven,” Yang Yuhuan replied. “Like gold and jade, a beautiful pair. Your mother came from the Jia family in Huayin, and we traveled to Chang’an together to attend Princess Xianyi’s wedding… Not long afterward, a plague spread through Luoyang, Hongnong, and Sili. Your father saved many citizens as a doctor.”

Yang Yuhuan looked up at Hongjun. Hongjun was silent, thinking of what the Duchess of Guo had said to him before she died. Freshly worried, he placed a hand on Yang Yuhuan’s wrist to take her pulse.

“His Majesty told me what happened to my sister,” Yang Yuhuan quietly said. “Hongjun, do you have any idea when the fox yao replaced my true sister?”

Hongjun frowned in thought as he again examined Yang Yuhuan's meridians with the sacred light. Yang Yuhuan wasn't a martial artist like Li Jinglong; her meridians were perfectly empty, offering no resistance against his intrusion. When he was satisfied, Hongjun crossed his arms and propped one foot up on the sideboard of the carriage, tilting his head toward Yang Yuhuan. "Do you remember ever seeing anything strange?"

"When I was young, I once saw a white fox," Yang Yuhuan murmured. "I remember I was fourteen that year."

"A white fox?" Hongjun found this odd. "Not a gray one?"

Yang Yuhuan nodded. "Later, after I married…after I married Li Mao, I fell severely ill. I was tortured by nightmares, and I had a high fever that wouldn't break. During that time, your father came to our estate with your mother and said I was fated to withstand this tribulation, but that there was only one way to save my life."

"What was that?" Hongjun asked.

Yang Yuhuan frowned. "He drew a seal on my back with a medicinal paste and said it could ward off yao and demons."

Suddenly, Hongjun thought he understood what had happened.

Chapter 39:
Space Talisman

HONGJUN HELD UP a hand. “Wait a moment. Let me think.”

He was unpracticed at reading others, but he was no idiot. The picture gradually sharpened in his imagination. The Yu Zaoyun whom the Duchess of Guo had mentioned as her younger sister—perhaps she was another fox yao, the white fox Yang Yuhuan had seen!

Wu Qiyu and Yu Zaoyun: These two were a pair of fox yao sisters. Hongjun saw the course of events clearly now. Wu Qiyu had first seized the body of the Duchess of Guo, then urged Yu Zaoyun to possess Yang Yuhuan. It was the same strategy the fox yao had employed in the imperial examination case. They had used their soul-devouring spell to trap the scholars’ souls in their own bodies, allowing the fox yao to transform into the scholars and sit the examination in their place.

Kong Xuan must have known Yu Zaoyun’s target was Yang Yuhuan and helped her escape this calamity. The scene seemed to unfold before Hongjun’s eyes: Yu Zaoyun slipping into Yang Yuhuan’s room in the middle of the night to consume her essence, only to suffer the backlash from the talisman his father had drawn on her body and see her powers destroyed in an instant.

“What did this talisman look like?” Hongjun asked. “Do you remember?”

Yang Yuhuan hesitated, studying Hongjun, then shook her head. It had been drawn on her back; she had never seen it with her own eyes.

But in that case, why had Wu Qiyu brought Yang Yuhuan to the observatory platform? Hongjun’s heart began to pound. Perhaps Yu Zaoyun hadn’t died—perhaps she was still alive within Yang Yuhuan’s body at this very moment. If that was true, then maybe his father’s sigil had only sealed the fox yao away instead of killing her for good.

“Let me check again.” Hongjun pressed his fingers to Yang Yuhuan’s pulse for a third time.

Yang Yuhuan obediently allowed Hongjun to hold her wrist. “Afterward, it was Doctor Kong’s prescription that cured me of that illness for good.”

“Did you continue to take it?” Hongjun asked.

Yang Yuhuan smiled. “No. I was cured completely.”

Hongjun’s final examination turned up nothing. At least there was one thing he could confirm: Whatever had happened to the fox yao during her attempted possession of Yang Yuhuan, no yao energy remained within the noble consort. Still, Hongjun thought it best to leave the details a bit vague. “Congratulations—Wu Qiyu wanted to steal your body, but it seems she failed. I’m guessing it happened around the time you fell ill all those years ago.”

“Then she acted as my elder sister for over a decade?” Yang Yuhuan asked. “No wonder. Dajie never liked me when we were young, but after my illness, she doted on me. All these years, she was actually… But if she had been replaced by a

yao, why did she care for me so attentively?"

Hongjun gazed into Yang Yuhuan's eyes. After a moment, he said, "Perhaps she really did want a younger sister."

Tears glittered on Yang Yuhuan's lashes. Finally, she couldn't hold them back, and they began to spill down her fair cheeks. Sobbing aloud, she said, "I've been so afraid to cry. My dajie turned out to be a monster who brought disaster upon the nation and its people. His Majesty has been merciful and not found fault with the Yang family—but in my eyes, whether she was yao or human, she was still my dajie. Do you understand?"

Hongjun hadn't expected Yang Yuhuan to cry. Yet as he sat with her, he understood her grief. The Duchess of Guo may have been a fox yao, but the noble consort had seen her as family—who wouldn't be sad after losing a sister? But she was afraid to say anything, and afraid to show too much sorrow before Li Longji.

He folded over his fish-scented sleeve and offered it to Yang Yuhuan. Yang Yuhuan dabbed at her eyes, and Hongjun kept her quiet company, not saying a word. "Shall I sing you a song?" he offered at last.

Yang Yuhuan didn't respond. Hongjun began, voice soft, "*Spring rivers surge level with the sea, tides push the moon above the ocean shore*…"

After hearing Li Guinian's rendition, he had learned the piece by heart. Sung in his youthful voice, even without accompaniment, it was a gentle and soothing melody.

The stars shone high above, and the night wind drove spikes of cold through Li Longji's and Li Jinglong's robes as they walked across the square. Li Jinglong was in his prime and unaffected by the chill, but Li Longji was an aging man. Afraid the emperor would catch a chill after working so many days straight, Li Jinglong suggested they head back inside the hall.

Li Longji waved off his concern. "When we were your age, we spent a long time downplaying our talents. We were the victim of all kinds of rumors in the palace. Thinking back on it now, it was quite similar to what you yourself have experienced."

Li Jinglong had heard the stories as well. When Empress Wu was in power, Li Longji had made the wise choice to protect himself by spending his days idle. Only by acting hopelessly inept had he managed to survive long enough to successfully overthrow Shangguan Wan'er and her co-conspirators. Li Jinglong mused wryly, *You were downplaying your talents, but I was just unlucky.*

"You'll find over the course of your life that a jewel, even if once dulled by dust, will always shine," Li Longji said. "In this respect, you and I are alike."

Li Jinglong hurriedly demurred. "Without my companions in the Department of Exorcism who risked their lives to subdue the yao, this subject would still be nothing but a layabout to this day."

Li Longji laughed and patted Li Jinglong on the shoulder, moved by the young man's modesty. "Now that you've chosen this path, know that it won't be an

easy one. Perhaps this will seem a cruel thing to say, but you may never have the chance to make a name for yourself under Heng-er's command."

I would far rather the keen blade that is the Department of Exorcism need never be unsheathed again. The moment Li Heng said this, Li Jinglong had understood. The Department of Exorcism was a double-edged blade. It could protect Great Tang, but should it ever rebel, its members could shake the very foundations of the empire; few would be safe from their extraordinary power. Li Longji's words, too, were a warning.

Logically, the best way to ensure the Department of Exorcism never became a threat to the government was to have them remain absolutely independent of it. They would not participate in court, would not form factions, would not have their achievements acknowledged, and would never be asked to voice their opinions on matters of policy. Even the highest-ranking officials in court would know little of the workings of the Department of Exorcism.

The emperor's message was clear: *From now on, it would behoove you to expect no noble titles or official positions, nor any praise or reward for your accomplishments; nor should you expect to interact with major officials or gain opportunities for political advancement. You will follow the crown prince's orders exactly and avoid drawing too much attention to yourselves. If the common people admire you too greatly, or you gain too much of a reputation, your life will grow more and more difficult.*

This was the best Li Longji could offer out of several bad options. But how many men could accept living their whole lives receiving no acknowledgment for their accomplishments, no matter how lofty? Li Jinglong went silent for a moment, then said, "This subject understands."

Li Longji nodded in satisfaction.

Within the carriage, Hongjun reached the final line of the song. Yang Yuhuan had regained her composure, but her eyes were still red, a sad smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Did you return to Chang'an to investigate what happened to your parents?" she asked. When Hongjun nodded, she continued, "Most of your maternal grandfather's family perished in the plague, but they were a notable family in Hexi, to the west. Your maternal grandfather was once the deputy military governor there. You have an uncle as well—I can't recall his name, but he was promoted to prefect of Jinchang fifteen years ago. He was demoted for his failure to suppress the Xiongnu, but I forget if he was sent to Sha Prefecture or Gua Prefecture. We can look into it for you; once my cousin reports back to the capital, perhaps we can find a chance for you to reunite with your family. You are all my saviors. If there is anything you need, come to the Chancellor Estate and ask the housekeeper to bring a message to my cousin."

Hongjun thanked her, and Yang Yuhuan picked up the box sitting at her side. "I brought you some of those pastries you like."

“Thanks!” Hongjun was sincerely happy this time, a smile blooming across his face.

Holding the pastries carefully in his hands, Hongjun stepped down from the carriage. It was chilly out, so he turned back and told Yang Yuhuan to stay inside while Li Longji and Li Jinglong meandered back toward them.

As the carriage drove away, Li Jinglong looked at Hongjun with a faint frown. Hongjun hadn’t expected him to look so dispirited after his conversation with the emperor. “What’s wrong?”

When Li Jinglong didn’t reply, Hongjun opened the box. “Cheer up; have one of these.”

“I seriously envy you,” Li Jinglong said, earnest. “How are you so happy-go-lucky all the time?”

Hongjun laughed. He’d felt sad while hearing about his parents, but at the same time, he’d felt a novel sense of belonging. Hearing Yang Yuhuan, someone who knew his family’s stories, speak of the father and mother he no longer remembered, he seemed to gain an extra connection to the human race—he was one of them, and this all-encompassing world of mortals included him as a matter of course.

When Hongjun and Li Jinglong returned to the Department of Exorcism that evening, every room was lit with the warm yellow glow of candlelight. Someone had even considerately left a glass lantern out beside the carp yao’s pond.

As Hongjun yawned, Li Jinglong shot him a glance. “What are you thinking?” Li Jinglong asked. Hongjun pondered a moment, but before he could reply, Li Jinglong continued, “I want to knock on everyone’s doors and have a talk with them.”

Hongjun stood in the corridor, looking at the muted lantern light behind the paper of each door. “I think things are already nice like this.”

Li Jinglong nodded. “Mm. Okay, let’s leave them be. Get some rest, and we’ll go visit the hot springs in Huaqing Palace tomorrow.”

“Really?!” Hongjun cried out in joy.

“What?” Qiu Yongsi called from inside, overhearing his yell. Li Jinglong quickly walked away. Qiu Yongsi didn’t poke his head out, so Hongjun, too, returned to his own room.

When Li Jinglong awoke the next morning, he found Qiu Yongsi, Mergen, A-Tai, Hongjun, and the carp yao all gathered around the Department of Exorcism’s front door, examining its wooden boards.

“Morning, Chief,” Mergen said with a smile.

Li Jinglong studied the door. Qiu Yongsi stood with a brush in his hand, drawing a talisman on the door’s surface in cinnabar ink.

“What’s this for?” Li Jinglong asked.

"Yongsi-ge[8] was inspired by the Duchess of Guo's spell," Hongjun explained. "He wants to see if he can seal off the Department of Exorcism."

"We can't have people just wandering in," A-Tai chimed in, "or let thieves get into this place."

What an excellent idea! Li Jinglong thought. If they could use an illusion technique or some sort of space-warping spell to separate the Department of Exorcism from the rest of the world, the emperor would never stroll in and catch them sleeping in again.

"Curve it a bit more in this direction," Hongjun said, pointing at one line of the sigil.

"Look here." Qiu Yongsi pointed at a spot near the edge. "There's the terraforming spell."

"I see it!" Hongjun was at the age when he was interested in everything, and Qiu Yongsi's abilities were the ones he admired most. A-Tai had his cyclone fan and could summon wind, fire, ice, and sand, but his abilities worked within the framework of the five elements. Mergen had his seven nailhead arrows that could track enemies as well as the ability to take the form of a gray wolf, but this, too, was within the compass of Hongjun's knowledge.

Qiu Yongsi was the only one who could flatten yaoguai into a painting with a wave of his brush or summon beings within a work of art into the living world, and he was an expert in talismans too. These were all things beyond Hongjun's understanding, and on top of that, Qiu Yongsi had a wealth of knowledge about spiritual devices.

"You could add some decorative elements," Hongjun said.

"Do you want to try it?" Qiu Yongsi smiled.

Hongjun picked up the brush, pondered a moment, then added a few decorative flourishes next to the sigil. "How's that?"

Everyone took a step back. Qiu Yongsi said, "Chief, do you want the first go? We'll have to set up some kind of a mechanism for activating it in the future, but we can make do with this for now."

Mergen taught Li Jinglong how to activate the sigil. Li Jinglong stood in the alley, his palm glowing with the power of the heart lamp. Suddenly the space inside the alley warped. The modified sigil came to life with a low hum and a glow, and bricks flew toward the doorway from all directions, clattering together to seal the door and hide it away.

"It worked!" Hongjun exclaimed in awe.

"Spin the sigil in the opposite direction, and it should open," Qiu Yongsi prompted.

Li Jinglong pushed his hand forward. Light radiated from the cracks between the bricks, and with another whir, the sigil on the door reversed. The bricks flew aside, and the door reappeared, swinging open to reveal the statue of Acalanatha watching them from the entrance hall.

“Excellent!” Eminently satisfied, Li Jinglong stepped back to let everyone else try it one by one. This resolved a tricky issue: From now on, the Department of Exorcism would no longer be an isolated office any random official could set foot in. Even if the crown prince himself came for a visit, he would have to wait for the door to be opened for him.

Li Longji’s reward arrived a short time later. His message made no mention of a promotion. Li Jinglong was still their chief, but the emperor had gifted them six horses, two hundred taels of gold, forty bolts of brocade, and four hundred pecks of grain, as well as six pieces of luminous-grained precious nanmu wood, with which they were to make tokens for the department.

Last but not least, there was also a little box containing a relic of Great Master Xuanzang. The carp yao clutched the box, hit by a wave of grief.

The six horses Li Longji had bestowed were fine Ferghana horses, each of a different color. The carp yao’s eyes bugged out of his head. “How am I supposed to ride mine?”

No one had any answer for him.

The carp yao climbed up into the saddle. Unable to reach the stirrups with his short legs, he tried clenching down with his thighs. He lifted his fish head toward the sky, but he could only see to the sides, not in front of him. Were he to ride out like this, he’d probably frighten more than a few people out of their wits.

“Um…” Hongjun ventured. “How about I just keep carrying you on my back?”

“Bring my horse with you when you all go out,” the carp yao said. “Otherwise, it’ll get lonely at home all by itself.”

Li Jinglong grudgingly agreed. “Let’s go to the hot springs on Mount Li.”

Everyone whooped in joy. Mounting their horses, they urged them through the back alley, out the west gate, and away from the city, riding toward Mount Li.

Hongjun rode at the head of the party on the white horse he had chosen, kicking up a breeze in his wake as he galloped across the plain. Li Jinglong followed him on a red piebald; Qiu Yongsi’s steed was black dun, Mergen’s was black, and A-Tai’s was a light palomino. A riderless gray horse followed at the end of the procession, galloping like the wind.

“Where’d you learn to ride?” Li Jinglong said. “My skills are better!”

“Then catch up!” Hongjun turned. “I’m dead certain my horse is faster!”

“No way! Should we see whose horse gets to Mount Li first?” Mergen called as he flew past them both.

“Hey!” A-Tai exclaimed. “Shall we bet on it?”

“Let’s do it!” Qiu Yongsi shouted. “We’ll bet a jar of amber liquor! Whoever gets there first gets to down the whole thing!”

“You’re going to lose by miles!” Li Jinglong called. “Whoever gets to Mount Li first can be the department’s boss!”

Everyone shouted, “You’re on, Chief!”

With a whistle, their Ferghana horses lengthened their strides. Everyone urged their horses onward, shooting toward Mount Li like bolts of lightning.

Four hours later, the results were in.

The first to arrive was the riderless gray horse. Li Jinglong was second, followed by Mergen in third, Qiu Yongsi in fourth, A-Tai in fifth, and Hongjun last.

Everyone was silent.

"Am I the boss now?" The carp yao was perplexed. Miracles seemed to always be occurring faster than a fish could adjust to them.

"This doesn't count, does it…?" Li Jinglong said. "No one was riding the horse."

"But Mergen didn't say 'who' gets to Mount Li first," Hongjun protested. "He said 'whose horse.'"

The carp yao said from Hongjun's back, "A gentleman is only as good as his word. Call me Boss."

"Fine. Bo…bo…" Li Jinglong trailed off.

How could Li Jinglong call a carp *Boss*?! Supposing the Department of Exorcism went on another mission in the future, the mental image of a carp leading an appointed official of Great Tang's imperial court and four exorcists into battle was enough to give anyone a breakdown.

Everyone watched Li Jinglong, thinking desperately, *Don't do it, don't do it; if you refuse, we can do the same. If you call that hairy-legged fish "Boss," we'll have turned the corner; there'll be no going back.*

"B-boss," Li Jinglong choked out.

"I can't hear you. Louder," the carp yao said, hands on his waist.

"Boss! Boss!" Li Jinglong cried.

"That's right, Second-in-Command," the carp yao said.

Reeling from this latest blow, the chief cursed his terrible luck. He felt as if he may as well give up on life entirely. Face overcast, he urged his horse up the mountain.

The others had no choice but to acknowledge their new subordinate positions. Even Hongjun found it a bit hard to say. He muttered a perfunctory "Boss," then called, "Let's go, let's go! To the hot springs!"

Chapter 40:
Warm Waters of Huaqing

HUAQING PALACE was a mess, still in the middle of reconstruction. They wouldn't be able to visit the pool the emperor and noble consort had used that night, but an annex had been built in the northwest corner of the complex, set in a small hollow where verdant peaks poked through the clouds.

It was a secluded and elegant locale. The hot springs were in the middle of a pine forest; an early snow had fallen over Mount Li the night before, and the pines were capped with white and adorned with crystals of ice. The crown prince Li Heng had personally ordered the servants to treat the exorcists as honored guests, and they were welcomed the moment they arrived for their three-day, two-night stay.

An afternoon mist wound itself around the highest peak as they settled in, spilling waterfalls of cloud between the mountain's tallest slopes and its adjoining minor peaks. The mist poured into the wooded hollow in which the annex was perched, giving the spot the half-lit, liminal quality of dawn and dusk. A constant melody of birdsong twittered in the background; squirrels leapt between the trees, and the resident flock of red-crowned cranes moved gracefully about the courtyard, forming a picturesque scene.

"Which is better, here or our department?" Li Jinglong said as he strolled down the corridor, one hand resting against the hilt of his sword.

"Both have their advantages," Qiu Yongsi said as he stopped before the courtyard. "The furnishings and decor here are not as fine as ours."

Li Jinglong chuckled and nodded. Standing under the eaves of the corridor, Hongjun noticed the look on Li Jinglong's face as he stretched his arms overhead. "Chief, you've been smiling a lot more lately."

For some reason, Li Jinglong's face went red. "Free time begins now," he said. "We'll meet up later for dinner."

Everyone scattered to their own rooms to change before visiting the hot springs. Hongjun had been assigned a small room at the end of the corridor, where he found tea, hot towels, and a bathrobe already set out for him.

In the courtyard, the carp yao clutched his relic and peered down into a pool of brocade carp from atop a bridge. He grabbed a handful of fish food and alternated between snacking on it and tossing it to the fish below.

"Aren't you coming?" Hongjun asked after changing into his bathrobe.

"I'm not," the carp yao said. "What fun is it to soak in water all day? I don't like the smell of sulfur."

"Can I see?" Hongjun climbed up the bridge and reached for the relic the carp yao was holding. "I heard them say your benefactor was an impressive Buddhist master."

"He attained enlightenment," the carp yao said. "He became the Buddha of Sandalwood Merit. He's the one who told me I need to accumulate lots of merits

before I can become a dragon. Just jumping over the Dragon Gate isn't enough."

Leaving the carp yao to his thoughts, Hongjun went to find some entertainment of his own. He crossed the corridor, heading for the hot springs in the rear mountain. As he passed Li Jinglong's room, he glanced inside and saw that Li Jinglong was in his bathrobe as well, a broad swath of his chest on display as he sat cross-legged in front of a table, mixing medicine in a bowl.

"Come here; give me a hand," Li Jinglong said when he spotted Hongjun.

Immediately, Hongjun identified the harsh scent of wound ointment. He stepped inside to help Li Jinglong prepare the concoction. "An ointment to stop bleeding and promote regeneration? Are you injured?"

Li Jinglong gazed at Hongjun for a moment. "Your father was a doctor?"

Hongjun nodded. "And Chong Ming has been teaching me medicine since I was young."

Bending his head, Li Jinglong focused on his task. "Your adoptive father must have wanted you to study medicine in honor of your birth father's profession."

Hongjun recalled the tear he'd seen rolling down Chong Ming's cheek when he'd opened his eyes that very first day—Chong Ming and his father, Kong Xuan, had once been fast friends, perhaps very much like himself and Li Jinglong. Hongjun suddenly imagined the unbearable pain he would feel if Li Jinglong died someday, and Hongjun was left to raise his child.

After all these years, he finally grasped the emotion lurking in Chong Ming's eyes every time he looked at Hongjun.

Li Jinglong had taught him so many things. Details he had never paid any attention to before began to solidify in his mind, emerging from the haze. Hongjun watched him curiously as he worked until the sun began to sink toward the west.

At last Li Jinglong finished his task and rose to his feet. "Let's go."

The other three appeared to have bathed earlier and left to relax elsewhere in the mountain hollow. The springs were hazy with steam in the waning light of day. All the amenities were prepared for them, including a screen for additional privacy.

"Undress, but don't get in the water. Let me take a look at you," Li Jinglong said, holding the medicine bowl.

"Huh?!" What kind of strange request was this? Hongjun felt suddenly awkward.

"I want to see if you have any other injuries," Li Jinglong said, sincere.

"I'm already fine…"

Li Jinglong looked steadily into Hongjun's eyes. "Why are you embarrassed?" He put down the bowl, shucked off his belt, and tossed his bathrobe to the ground.

Hongjun's face went crimson. They were both men, but he had never seen his colleagues unclothed before. Li Jinglong was slim, with firm muscles, a beautiful, well-defined chest, and a trim, powerful waist. Hongjun's heart thudded in his chest.

Li Jinglong's face was also going red. "Strip."

Hongjun's breath quickened. Unable to tear his eyes away from Li Jinglong, he untied his bathrobe and set it aside. As his nervousness faded, he couldn't help looking Li Jinglong up and down. *Wow, the chief has such a nice body!*

He had broad shoulders and long legs. He'd shot up into a tall and gangly coatrack around the age of fourteen, but after years of diligent martial training, he had attained the ideal soldier's proportions. His skin was a healthy wheat-brown and shone like silk, and his muscles were defined in smooth, gentle curves. This was the kind of body and skin tone Hongjun admired most—he had always thought he was too fair, himself. Li Jinglong had the perfect amount of muscle without being too bulky or too slender; he was nothing short of perfect. And…*he was so big there too!*

That length between Li Jinglong's legs was thick and well sculpted, packed with explosive power. It had to be almost a foot long when hard. Hongjun boggled. He forced down his nerves, his eyes never leaving Li Jinglong despite his flaming cheeks.

Li Jinglong awkwardly pressed a hand to his nose and glanced down. The sight of Hongjun's youthful body nearly gave him a nosebleed. Looking back up, he scanned him from head to toe. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Chief, you're so big." Hongjun was almost salivating. Li Jinglong's powerful form was exactly the kind of body to which youths like him aspired.

"I didn't strip down so you could look at that…" Li Jinglong felt awkward now too. "T-turn around."

Mystified, Hongjun obeyed. Li Jinglong had him stand near the edge of the hot spring, facing the water. Their bare silhouettes were reflected in the cold pool nearby.

Hongjun had a fair complexion, thick, dark brows, and clear eyes. He was only sixteen, but he had already attained his full height. Unlike Li Jinglong with his soldier's physique, he was slender, with some indistinct muscle around his chest and abdomen from practicing with his throwing knives and light shield. His skin was as luminous as a pool of fresh milk.

Looking down at their reflections in the water, Hongjun felt his own body begin to react with interest.

"Is there anything different between you and me?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun started in surprise and tilted his head back to look at Li Jinglong, who set a hand on his shoulder. Hongjun had the sudden urge to turn and lean into Li Jinglong's chest.

"What I meant is…you're human, aren't you?" Li Jinglong asked.

"Of course." Hongjun was bewildered. He'd never expected Li Jinglong to ask him such a question. "Why?"

Staring into Hongjun's eyes, Li Jinglong seemed to hesitate. Both their cheeks were still stained pink, and Hongjun's heart began to beat faster and faster, leaving him a little lightheaded.

“Then…” Li Jinglong began. “Get in!”

He shoved Hongjun toward the hot spring. Caught off guard, Hongjun yelped and splashed into the water. Li Jinglong burst into laughter and went to fetch the medicine bowl. Hongjun popped back up, hair dripping, and yelled, “You tricked me!”

When Li Jinglong joined him in the hot spring, Hongjun pounced and tried to shove his head underwater.

“Stop! Let me apply the ointment.” Li Jinglong grabbed Hongjun’s wrists and pulled him toward the edge of the pool. “Let’s get you cleaned up first.”

Hongjun’s face was scarlet again. “I thought you were going to say—”

“Let me see,” Li Jinglong interrupted. “Don’t move your head.”

Hongjun tried to claw at Li Jinglong’s stomach, but accidentally grabbed him below the waist instead. Li Jinglong immediately got hard, and the atmosphere became painfully awkward.

Li Jinglong stepped backward a pace and schooled his face to seriousness. “Don’t move; I’m trying to look at your injuries!”

At last Hongjun stopped resisting and sprawled over the edge of the pool, shoulders rising and falling as he breathed. Li Jinglong picked up a towel and frowned, concerned. “Stop touching your ear all the time. It’s infected.”

Turning, Hongjun pressed the other side of his face to the edge of the pool, eyes darting back and forth over Li Jinglong’s features. He had applied some medicine after his ear was injured, but it had started to itch as it healed. He’d caught himself rubbing at it, trying to make sure it healed right, and knew he’d been touching it in his sleep. “It’ll be fine once it scabs over.”

Li Jinglong waded closer to him in the warm spring water and washed his injury. They stood almost nose to nose, breath intermingling. Hongjun’s heart began to pound again.

“Chief, is there something on your mind?” Hongjun asked. Li Jinglong had been acting strange all day.

“I was just thinking…that apparently, you don’t always smell like fish.” Finished cleaning the injury, Li Jinglong brought over the bowl to apply the ointment.

“Thanks.”

“Why are you thanking me?” Li Jinglong sighed. “It’s my fault you’re hurt. If your dad found out, he’d beat me to death.”

“He won’t,” Hongjun said. “Even if he does, my ear will be better by then, so it’s fine.”

Li Jinglong attentively spread the ointment over Hongjun’s ear with a wooden spoon. “Weren’t you going to take me home with you? When are we going?”

“Huh?” Hongjun had forgotten all about this promise. He’d been drunk and nearly dead to the world; he had no memories of the latter half of that night in

Pingkang Ward.

As Li Jinglong walked him back through their slurred conversation, Hongjun felt his face heat with embarrassment. Li Jinglong said, “It doesn’t matter if you don’t remember—you made me a promise.”

Hongjun always kept his promises. But Li Jinglong and their other colleagues were exorcists, while all the residents of Yaojin Palace were technically yao. What was he supposed to do? It was the same dilemma that had plagued Hongjun all these weeks. He worried the others would reject him when they discovered his true origins.

Li Jinglong dipped his head lower, completely focused on applying the medicine. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“I… Yes.” Hongjun’s heart was racing. He tried to catch Li Jinglong’s eye, but Li Jinglong intentionally avoided his gaze.

Li Jinglong’s fingers began to tremble slightly.

Hongjun had thought it over many times. Qing Xiong had said that after driving the yao king out of Chang’an, he and Chong Ming could return to the city. Once they did, would they end up clashing with the Department of Exorcism? He had asked the carp yao, who said that even if Chong Ming chose to rule over the human realm, he would never harm regular people as the fox yao had. But, of course, it wasn’t as if Chong Ming was some docile little songbird, either. Perhaps conflict was unavoidable.

There was another question that bothered him even more: His father was a yao, and his mother was a human—did that make him human or yao?

After applying the ointment, Li Jinglong picked up a roll of bandages. “Don’t touch your ear again once these are on. The ointment needs to be changed every three days; I’ll do it for you.”

Hongjun hummed his agreement.

“You’ve had something on your mind ever since you joined the Department of Exorcism,” Li Jinglong said. “Is it something to do with your parents?” When Hongjun said nothing, Li Jinglong went on, “I don’t know the details, but I hope that you’ll share your worries with me someday. If you trust me.”

Li Jinglong sat down in the pool and laid his elbow over the edge.

Hongjun was overtaken by the sudden impulse to confess. “Chief… I…” Hongjun turned to him, hesitated, then finally blurted, “There’s something I’ve been keeping from everyone.”

Li Jinglong frowned, a look of confusion in his eyes.

“I… I’m actually half yao.” Hongjun’s heart seemed to be suspended in his throat, unable to drop back into his chest.

To his surprise, Li Jinglong began to laugh. “Mm, just as I thought.”

Hongjun was speechless.

Picking up a towel to wipe his arms, Li Jinglong said, “Your father was a yao, right? He saved the noble consort’s life.”

"You…don't mind?"

"Ever since I saw Zhao Zilong," Li Jinglong said mildly, "I figured you had deep connections with the yao race. Hongjun, we've put our lives in each other's hands many times now. Let me ask you one thing—you don't have to answer if you don't want to. You were sent to Chang'an by a different yao faction than the yao king, right?"

Hongjun was caught completely on the wrong foot—to think Li Jinglong had guessed his background so easily! Though, considering how meticulous Li Jinglong was about everything, perhaps Hongjun should have expected it. He could only nod and reply honestly, "Before I left the mountain, Chong Ming and Qing Xiong gave me the task of driving the yao king out of Chang'an."

"And what did they say would happen after that?" Li Jinglong stared into Hongjun's eyes as if looking into his very soul. He had the vague notion that somewhere in the shadows, two large yao factions had staked out the human capital of Chang'an as their battleground. Now that they'd driven the nine-tailed fox out, did Hongjun's faction intend to take over the city?

This was the point he was most worried about.

"I don't know," Hongjun said. "But whether Chong Ming returns to Chang'an or not, he would never eat people or harm any of the citizens here."

Chong Ming was a phoenix, Hongjun explained. He considered well water too filthy and wouldn't even drink snowmelt after it touched the ground; he was unbelievably picky about his meals. He'd never eat a human who had been contaminated with heaven knew what mortal detritus.

"You're human," Li Jinglong said, earnest. "Hongjun, you're definitely human. When you removed your clothes, did you see any difference between you and me?"

Li Jinglong knew Hongjun had no knack for picking up subtle cues or veiled implications. But with this, Hongjun at last understood.

With a small smile, Li Jinglong continued, "I was worried your body was different from an ordinary human's somehow. That's why I delayed you for so long before coming here—so the others wouldn't see."

Li Jinglong stepped forward and caught Hongjun's hand, laying it on his own chest as he pressed his palm over Hongjun's in turn. "Listen," Li Jinglong said. "My heart and your heart are in the same place; human blood flows through your body."

"You're right." Hongjun smiled. He felt Li Jinglong's vigorous heartbeat pulsing beneath his palm, radiating a warm glow.

"I think this is why your adoptive father sent you to Chang'an—so you would understand this," Li Jinglong said. "But perhaps that's just my wishful thinking."

"Chief, if one day, we had to fight on opposite sides—"

"I couldn't do it," Li Jinglong said. Gravely, he continued, "Not that I'd stand a chance against you, anyway."

Hongjun burst into giggles. Li Jinglong put a hand atop his head and ruffled his hair. “But I’d put up a valiant struggle. I hope you’d show a little mercy; don’t beat me up too badly.”

“I wouldn’t, Chief!” Hongjun was really laughing now. “I’m human too.”

Li Jinglong scooted over and made room for Hongjun to sit next to him, their arms pressed together. Hongjun leaned back against the edge of the pool, and Li Jinglong shifted his arm to let Hongjun use it as a headrest to keep his ear out of the water.

The mountains looked like distant smudges of ink as the sun sank toward the horizon. As the pair soaked in the hot spring, a light fall of snow began to drift from the clouds overhead.

Hongjun murmured into Li Jinglong’s ear, “When the noble consort brought up my mother last night, I had this feeling…”

“Oho!” a voice exclaimed.

“What are you two doing out here?”

“Sneaking off to flirt by yourselves!”

Qiu Yongsi, Mergen, and A-Tai took a running jump into the pool. Startled, Li Jinglong covered Hongjun’s ear. He hadn’t realized the others hadn’t been to the hot springs yet. “Careful, we just bandaged it!”

The other three clustered around to make sure the bandages over Hongjun’s ear hadn’t gotten soaked.

“Hongjun, come here,” Mergen said with a smile. “Want to sit on my lap?”

Hongjun made a face.

Qiu Yongsi said, “Hongjun, ignore him. Come sit on Gege’s lap instead.”

Cheeks flaming red, Hongjun snapped, “Cut it out!”

A-Tai smiled. “Then, shall I sit on your lap?”

“I’m out of here,” Li Jinglong said. “You guys have fun.”

Li Jinglong stood to leave, but Mergen dragged him back. “What is this, a mutiny?” Li Jinglong snapped over the sound of Qiu Yongsi’s uproarious laughter. The other three took turns shoving Li Jinglong under the water.

“Hey!” Hongjun cried. “How can you treat the chief like that?”

“What?” Mergen chuckled. “Do you feel bad for him?”

Water dripping into his eyes, Li Jinglong was about to smack the three of them when Hongjun continued, “How can you treat the chief like that and leave me out?! No fair!”

He lunged forward to dunk Li Jinglong next.

Li Jinglong sputtered under the water, unable to say a thing.

As dusk fell, plumes of dust rose over the great desert. Bugles echoed across the horizon as the dying light painted the sands in bloody hues.

Soldiers yelled in a panic from atop the city wall.

"Enemy attack—!"

"We're being attacked!"

"Is it the Xiongnu?"

"I don't know…"

Dong—dong—dong—

In a high tower over a city in Mingsha District, the emergency bell began to toll. Infants wailed, and the shrill screams of women rang inside the city.

"How many?!" the commander of the city guard demanded as he ran up the battlements, taking the stairs two at a time.

"Three thousand… No, twelve thousand… No, more! More!"

"Fall into formation! Close the city gates!"

The soldiers shoved against the great cranks to shut the city gates, which closed with a thunderous rumble. Hundreds of men ran to their posts atop the walls, loading crossbows and nocking arrows to bowstrings. Dust blotted out the sky as an enormous mass of fifty thousand black-armored cavalry advanced on the city.

The rocky desert of the Gobi beyond the walls was silent, without even a whinny from the enemy's horses. The soldiers rode with their dark-helmed heads lowered, clutching their lances as if blind to the rows of arrowheads bristling atop the walls ahead.

Fewer than five thousand guards were stationed in Mingsha District, and the army had arrived without warning. No signal fires burned atop the Great Wall snaking along the horizon.

"Where did they all come from?" the commander's voice trembled.

The black-armored general at the head of the army raised his lance and pointed it at the city walls. Fifty thousand cavalrymen readied their lances and snapped their reins; in the next instant, nothing could be heard but the thunder of hooves against the ground as they charged toward the city in a vast, earthshaking wave.

"Fire! All archers, *fire*!"

Thousands of arrows sang from bows atop the city wall, flying toward the enemy army rushing forward like an incoming tide—yet no men tumbled from their saddles as the city guard expected. Instead, the arrows embedded themselves in the soldiers and horses, turning them into moving pincushions as they continued to charge until they collided with the city walls. The rammed-earth walls collapsed under the force of the impact. Thousands of black-armored soldiers galloped across the rubble and into the city.

Knocked down by a charging horse, the commander of the city guard took a lance to the chest. Nailed to the ground, wild-eyed in the moment before his death, he looked up into the cloudy white eyes of the enemy soldier, glowing beneath his dark helmet.

Chapter 41:
A Reluctant Parting

"COME ON," Li Jinglong said. "Let's eat, let's eat!"

Inside the Huaqing Palace annex, the lamps were brightly lit, illuminating the falling snow in the mountain hollow and casting shadows upon the curtained doors. The great silhouette of a fish swayed to and fro in front of a lamp.

"Stop staring," Hongjun said to Zhao Zilong with a laugh. "It's time to eat."

After one last longing look at the brocade carp on the lampshade, the carp yao reluctantly clambered down from the cabinet.

Li Jinglong personally poured wine for his subordinates, smiling. "We only met two months ago, but it feels like we've known each other much longer. They say those who survive life-and-death situations together were deeply connected in their past lives…"

Everyone hastily interjected, insisting that it was all thanks to the chief's hard work. Li Jinglong filled everyone's cups, then raised his own in a toast. "May Chang'an suffer no further disasters. May the heavens bless Great Tang!"

"May the heavens bless Great Tang." The other four exorcists and the carp yao joined the toast and tipped back their wine. Li Jinglong once again urged everyone to eat.

Mergen smiled. "It's only been two months? Why does it feel like a lifetime?"

"We joined the Department of Exorcism on the eighteenth day of the ninth month," Qiu Yongsi said, amused. "The place was so overgrown, I thought I'd come to the wrong address."

Hongjun giggled. "When the chief barged in that day, his face went green with fright, remember?"

Everyone burst into laughter. When Li Jinglong stepped into the Department of Exorcism for the first time, he'd been met with the sight of A-Tai playing his barbat, Mergen plucking his bow, Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun knocking about with cups and bowls, and the carp yao dancing in a basin… The scene had nearly traumatized Feng Changqing for life.

"To be honest, I acted rashly that day," Li Jinglong said ruefully. "I shouldn't have attacked like that."

Mergen beamed brightly and changed the subject to the little fox they'd released. He teased Hongjun until Hongjun huffed, "There was nothing between us! I just don't have the heart to kill cute little animals…"

"Speaking of which, I made a few paintings for you guys, if you'd like to take a look." Qiu Yongsi turned to grab a stack of paper behind him and handed them out one by one. "You're always in the water, so I'll have Hongjun hold onto it for you," he told the carp yao.

After divvying up the paintings, everyone saw that Qiu Yongsi had vividly rendered a number of scenes from their daily lives: Li Jinglong walking into the Department of Exorcism for the first time; the whole department sitting between two folding screens as they listened to music at the Spring Oriole; all of them battling yao at Daming Palace; meeting with the crown prince at Gold Blossom's Fall; sitting beneath the ginkgo tree in the imperial gardens while waiting for His Majesty's summons…

There was even a painting depicting their race to Mount Li earlier in the day. This last was the carp yao's favorite. "I want this one!"

"These are different from the shan shui landscape paintings one normally sees," Li Jinglong noted with interest.

"My grandfather always complains that I paint too realistically," Qiu Yongsi responded. "People rarely want my paintings."

"I like them." Hongjun rolled up his painting, but he couldn't bear to set it down. "I'm going to frame it and hang it up."

Everyone fell silent as they examined the paintings, and the atmosphere turned a bit strange.

"I have something for everyone too," Mergen said. He produced several small flutes fashioned from bone, which he passed out. "They're whistles carved from the wolf king's finger bones. Blow them in Shiwei territory, and you'll summon my people. Whether it's acting as a guide, partaking in a meal, or killing an enemy, they will help with whatever you need."

The bone flutes were delicately crafted, with a red string attached to one end, and produced a bright and melodious sound when blown. To Hongjun, they were more precious than the beads given to him by the crown prince Li Heng.

"I want to give you guys something too," Hongjun said. "What if I took this bracelet apart?"

Everyone rushed to stop him, but Hongjun had already snapped the string. Jade beads clattered all over the ground. Li Jinglong pressed a hand to his forehead.

"You could purchase half the land in Luoyang with this bracelet, and you simply…take it apart, just like that?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

"It's fine, it's fine," Hongjun assured him. "The fish tanks in my home are filled with beads like these. If I need to, I'll just string a few together…"

Everyone thought it best not to comment.

The bracelet had twelve beads in total, so Hongjun gave everyone two apiece. When he handed Zhao Zilong his share, the carp yao said, "I haven't transformed into a dragon yet, but you're giving me pearls to play with? You hold onto them for me."

"What if you strung Zhao Zilong's beads together with his relic of Great Master Xuanzang on a necklace? He can tuck it behind his gills."

Now, there was a good idea. Hongjun gladly set to making jewelry for the carp yao. Zhao Zilong couldn't hold his alcohol; after a couple cups of wine, he

staggered and swayed a few steps before tipping over in a stupor.

"Come, let's have another cup," Li Jinglong said to the rest.

He moved to refill their cups when Mergen snatched the wine jar. "Allow me."

"Chief, here's to you," A-Tai said.

As Hongjun lifted his cup along with the others, Li Jinglong stopped him. "Your wounds have just healed; you shouldn't have too much wine. I'll drink it on your behalf." Li Jinglong downed both cups without blinking. "Let's eat. Everyone, help yourselves."

Everyone filled their bowls, but as Li Jinglong took his first bite, the atmosphere became subdued once more. Even Hongjun sensed the shift. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's nothing." Qiu Yongsi smiled warmly at Hongjun. "You're a good kid, Hongjun."

Li Jinglong set down his chopsticks with a deep sigh. "Whatever it is you want to say, let's have it. I'm listening."

Qiu Yongsi, Mergen, and A-Tai exchanged a look. After a moment, Hongjun asked, "What's wrong with you guys?"

Mergen sighed. "Chief, Hongjun—to be honest, I have to go."

"Why?!" Hongjun couldn't hide his disappointment.

Instead of responding, Li Jinglong merely regarded Mergen calmly before glancing at Qiu Yongsi.

"I have to go too, Chief," Qiu Yongsi said.

A-Tai offered them a sad smile. "The Han people often say there is no banquet that doesn't come to an end. I must leave as well, Chief."

Hongjun had no idea what to say. "You…you guys…" He wondered if he'd heard wrong. "But why? We finally got rid of the yao king—wouldn't it be better to stay? Chang'an's such a great city. There are so many things to eat, so many things to do…"

"Hongjun," the carp yao admonished.

Mergen sighed. "To be honest, Chief, before coming here, I had already undertaken a different mission."

"To find the white deer?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun started in surprise. How did Li Jinglong know about that? Noting Hongjun's expression, the carp yao asked, "Are you daft? Didn't you hear what Mergen asked at the astronomical observatory?"

Only then did Hongjun remember. "But we've found no trace of the white deer in Chang'an. What if I asked Qing Xiong and Chong Ming about it?"

"No," Mergen responded. "The white deer is the god of dreams who guards the night; she is not a yao. She went missing from the grasslands a hundred and twenty years ago. As the inheritor of the powers of the gray wolf, I'm duty bound to

find her. I came to Chang'an because I thought perhaps the yao king had imprisoned her. She doesn't appear to be in the Central Plains, though, so I must continue my search."

"What if you never find her?" Li Jinglong asked.

"The white deer's power is like your heart lamp," Mergen said. "She gallops through our dreams, driving away our nightmares. Without her, there's no way to banish those bad dreams, and the malign energies in the world will only grow stronger and stronger."

Li Jinglong blew out a slow breath as Hongjun frowned and asked, "Where do you intend to look?"

"After leaving Chang'an, I'll travel south, then head to Central Shu," Mergen responded. "Chief, everything in this world—the malign energies of heaven and earth; yao, demons, ghosts, and monsters; auspicious beasts and even enlightened deities—they're all inextricably linked. Each checks the other's powers in turn, one flourishing while another declines. Pull one thread, and the whole will unravel…"

Li Jinglong raised a hand. He understood what Mergen was getting at; there was no need to say more. A hush settled over the room.

It was Qiu Yongsi who broke the silence. "My mission is to find Xie Yu, the black jiao that escaped the Dragon-Quelling Tower. Two hundred years ago, it consumed a number of other jiao to increase its power. After escaping the bottom of the tower, it went on to wage a war against the phoenix clan."

An uneasy chill gripped Hongjun's heart as he recalled what Chong Ming had said before he left.

"In the end, the phoenix clan lost," Qiu Yongsi continued. "They withdrew from the human realm, and Xie Yu went into hiding in the Central Plains. Before coming here, I thought perhaps it had become the yao king of Chang'an. But it seems that wasn't so."

"This concerns me, as well," Li Jinglong responded. "So you intend to keep looking for Xie Yu. What will you do when you find this jiao?"

"I'll catch it and reseal it in the Dragon-Quelling Tower."

"Where is the Dragon-Quelling Tower?" Hongjun asked.

"If I accidentally transform into a dragon—will you take me captive too?" the carp yao added.

"It's in a place none of you can enter," Qiu Yongsi said. "The Dragon-Quelling Tower was built by the ancient Daoist immortal Guang Chengzi. Despite the name, the creatures imprisoned within are not dragons but fiendish and bloodthirsty jiao. The Qiu family has acted as guardians of this tower for generations."

He sighed. "I was so certain it had come to Chang'an and become the yao king. It never occurred to me that the yao king would be a nine-tailed fox." Qiu Yongsi smiled grimly. "Searching for Xie Yu is like fishing for a needle in the sea. I'm afraid I must bid all of you a very long farewell."

After a pause, Li Jinglong turned to A-Tai. "And what about you?"

“When His Majesty summoned me into Gold Blossom’s Fall the other night, he promised to lend me use of Ku’ertai District near the Wusun Ancient Road to recruit soldiers and buy horses,” A-Tai responded. “He gave me a handwritten decree. What do you guys think?”

Mergen frowned—it was also the first he was hearing of this. “It’s way too dangerous! The Xiongnu frequently roam the Ku’ertai region—how will you ever establish a foothold there?”

“I have my guards. And regardless of my current circumstances, I’m still a descendant of the sage king of Persia.” A-Tai chuckled, flicking his fan open. “What ordinary Xiongnu could be a match for us?”

Li Jinglong nodded. “Why didn’t you mention this when you came back that night?”

“Chief, I didn’t want to trouble you and the others. I appreciate all you’ve done for me these past two months.”

A-Tai stepped back and performed a very proper bow; Hongjun hurried forward to help him up. For a moment, everyone couldn’t help but sigh.

“Leaving is best for all of us,” Qiu Yongsi said. “Now that the yao king of Chang’an is dead, the Son of Heaven and his court officials will grow wary of us if we stay too long. The Department of Exorcism has the power to subdue yao, but it can also—”

“I know.” Li Jinglong cut him off. Mergen, noting Li Jinglong’s expression, realized that the Son of Heaven had already fallen prey to this very fear. Li Jinglong continued, “Will you come back?”

“After I find the white deer, I’ll take her back to the grasslands,” Mergen responded. “But should our journey take us through Chang’an, I would ask the chief to officiate our wedding.”

Li Jinglong smiled at that, but the expression was tinged with sorrow.

“Once I capture the black jiao, I might have to keep watch over West Lake—it’s the only entrance to the Dragon-Quelling Tower,” Qiu Yongsi explained. “But I’ll try to visit Chang’an now and then. And you’re all welcome as guests in my home at any time.”

“I can’t say whether I’ll recover my homeland in this lifetime,” A-Tai admitted. “But if there comes a day when I hit rock bottom, I may have no choice but to seek you guys out.”

Li Jinglong chuckled. “Well, in that case, I hope you don’t come back.”

Everyone dissolved into laughter. Yet as they laughed and laughed, their eyes turned red. Sighing, Li Jinglong looked away and turned to Hongjun. “What about you?”

Hongjun was still in shock; it took him a moment to gather his thoughts. Eventually, he stuttered, “I… I…”

At the time Hongjun had departed Yaojin Palace, he hadn’t wanted to leave. Chong Ming and Qing Xiong had charged him with three tasks: first, return the

heart lamp to its rightful owner; second, expel the yao king of Chang'an; and third, learn the truth of his origins. As things stood, he wasn't sure whether he had resolved the matter of the heart lamp, but the yao king of Chang'an had indeed been defeated. He had also more or less figured out his origins—all that remained was to find his father's killer.

"I…should be staying a while longer?" Hongjun looked back at Li Jinglong in a daze. He suddenly felt that this parting was awfully cruel to the chief. It was said the ties of fate were as fleeting as drifting clouds, but Li Jinglong didn't seem like someone who had many friends. Once everyone in the Department of Exorcism left and with no more yao to fight in Chang'an, what would Li Jinglong do? He'd be reduced to spending his days alone in their headquarters, waiting for their return.

Mergen smiled. "Hongjun, in that case, you'll have to take good care of the chief."

"Actually, why don't we just leave the chief to you?" A-Tai suggested. "If nothing else, you're a prince. Whenever you decide to go home, take him with you."

Qiu Yongsi chimed in: "Perfect! It's a promise!"

Li Jinglong was speechless. Worried Li Jinglong would be overwhelmed by sadness, Hongjun promptly accepted. "All right! It's a promise!"

"I haven't agreed yet!" Li Jinglong protested. "And you three—leaving just like that! Don't you feel any guilt?"

"You still have Hongjun." Qiu Yongsi grinned.

"That's right, that's right; you still have Hongjun," A-Tai and Mergen echoed as they toasted Li Jinglong again.

Li Jinglong tossed the wine back. "Fine. You can go," he said, "but if Chang'an is beset by yao again, how do I find you?"

"There is nowhere the domain of dreams does not touch," Mergen responded. "If Chang'an is engulfed in yao energy again, I will return."

"Send a letter with one of the merchant caravans bound for the Western Regions; tell them to bring it to Ku'ertai," A-Tai said. "If it comes to it, I would not hesitate to sacrifice my life for your sake."

"Chief, send a letter to Willow Villa at West Lake in Hang Prefecture via the relay stations, and my family will notify me as a matter of course," Qiu Yongsi said.

Li Jinglong looked down into his wine cup and sighed. "Ever since we met, I knew there would come a day when you all left—but I didn't expect it to come so soon. I'm the one at fault—"

"How are you at fault?" Mergen laughed. "If not for our chief, we would never have worked as a team."

"I'm the one at fault for not cherishing our days together." Li Jinglong raised his eyes to look at the others. Slowly, he said, "I only hope we will meet again in this lifetime."

Tears welled up in Qiu Yongsi's, Mergen's, and A-Tai's eyes. Hongjun held back a sniffle.

"I don't have any gift worth giving to you," Li Jinglong said quietly. He bowed his head, pressing slender fingers to his brow. "But when you go, take your horses with you. Even if you leave them here at the Department of Exorcism, I won't let anyone else ride them."

He smiled again, and everyone nodded solemnly.

"Shall I play us a song?" A-Tai suggested, a bit too quickly. He turned to grab his barbat and strummed the strings before anyone could respond.

"Morning rains in Wei City dampen the dust of the road,

The guesthouse willows are verdant as new replaces old…

Dear friend, let us stay and have one more drink before you go,

There are no friends to be found beyond Yang Pass on the road…"

Hongjun often listened to "Song of Yang Pass," but he had merely focused on the melody. Only now did he hear the heartache and melancholy in its lyrics.

The notes from A-Tai's barbat spilled into the night. When he finished the tune, Mergen said, "Enough with the depressing music already!"

"All right, all right," A-Tai said. "I'll play something else!"

"In the shadow of the Yin Mountains lie the Tiele Plains… Upon boundless green, beneath endless blue, grasses bend before the wind, revealing herds in plain view…"[9]

That night, everyone drank to their hearts' content while singing "Song of Yang Pass" and "The Moon over the River on a Spring Evening." They recited, *"Do you not see the Yellow River spilling from the sky, surging to the seas, never to return? Do you not see the grief for white hair in the looking glass of great halls, black silk at morning, turned to snow by night?"*[10] followed by, *"Stiff winds send autumn geese a thousand miles hence; from a high tower, we drink our fill and watch the scene. Your writing is as vigorous as that of Jian'an scholars of old; my poetry lovely and refreshing as that of Xie Tiao. I cleave my sword through running water, only to heighten its flow; I lift my cup to drown my sorrows, only to deepen my woe…"*[11]

By a few hours after midnight, everyone was collapsed on the floor, leaning against each other, slumped against the table or slouched against the wall in a drunken stupor. The carp yao lay atop the table on his side, his tail flicking from time to time.

Mergen opened his alcohol-reddened eyes, rubbed his temples, and sat up with a sigh. He said quietly, "My brothers, may we meet again."

He slowly got to his feet. At the door, he dropped to one knee, pressing his left hand to his chest and bowing deeply before turning to leave.

Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai woke a few moments later.

"Should we go too?" Qiu Yongsi mouthed.

A-Tai nodded. Farewells were always filled with sorrow. Much better to slip away quietly.

Within the hour, Mergen, A-Tai, and Qiu Yongsi, each astride the horse the emperor had gifted them, reached the edge of the official road at the foot of Mount Li.

"I'm headed west," A-Tai said.

"Northeast," said Mergen.

"And I'm going south," Qiu Yongsi said. "In that case, my brothers, let's say our goodbyes here. The sky is high and the road is long. May we meet again."

"The mountains are tall, and the seas are vast. I'm sure we will," Mergen said.

"Hai mie hou bi!" A-Tai said with a smile. "I'll miss you guys!"

"Honestly, I've always wanted to ask," Qiu Yongsi said. "What does *hai mie hou bi* mean?"

"It's what Persian people say when they meet their friends again after a long separation," A-Tai explained. "It means, 'Ah! We meet again, dear friend.'"

"But that's how you greeted us when we first met," Mergen said with a chuckle. "We were strangers back then, not friends."

A-Tai looked up into the deep black of the night sky. The seven stars of the Northern Dipper glimmered on the horizon. "I knew then," A-Tai said, serious for once, "that we would one day become the dearest of friends. This was an act of destiny—our meeting seemed a chance encounter, but in truth, it was fated to be. What's wrong with what I said?"

With that, he spurred his horse forward. As A-Tai rode off into the night, Qiu Yongsi wheeled his horse around and followed suit, taking the official road south.

Mergen looked back once more at Mount Li, then lowered his eyes to the leather saddle beneath him. "Chief, Hongjun, take care," he said quietly. He urged his horse forward as well.

The three riders turned toward their respective destinations. Within minutes, they had disappeared into the darkness of the plains.

Chapter 42:
Flaming Phoenix Feathers

IN THE PALACE ANNEX at Mount Li, the lights still blazed. Li Jinglong was slumped against the table, fast asleep; Hongjun lay beside him, his face as peaceful in repose as that of any carefree child.

Li Jinglong raised his head, his eyes red-rimmed as he took in the mess of cups scattered across the table. He turned to Hongjun. "It's just us now," he said quietly, reaching out to smooth Hongjun's hair back with gentle fingers. "Come on… Get up."

He wrapped his outer robe around Hongjun and gathered him into his arms, letting Hongjun's head fall against his chest. Li Jinglong lifted him with some effort and walked barefoot down the winding corridor to Hongjun's room, where he slid the door open with his foot. Wheezing, Li Jinglong set Hongjun on the bed and covered him with a blanket. "Whew…"

He sat down beside Hongjun's bed, his eyes filled with sadness. He didn't want to go back to his own room, so he settled down on the ground fully clothed and fell asleep.

That night, Hongjun had a strange dream. He dreamed there was a lamp beside him that illuminated the night. Its gentle glow hovered at his side while somewhere outside, perhaps a short distance away, the bright rays of a fiery red sun spilled in through the window. That morning radiance seemed to call out to him as it warmed his body.

Just before dawn, Hongjun awoke.

The glare of the red sun disappeared the instant he opened his eyes, leaving only the gleam of the unextinguished lamp beside him.

How long did I sleep? Hongjun exhaled slowly, glancing over at Li Jinglong still slumped against the side of his bed, sound asleep. Hongjun sat up, a bit thirsty. He slid out of bed and paced a few steps around the room before coming to a stop before the window. He pushed it open on instinct.

Despite the early hour, it was bright outside, the snow reflecting the predawn light. As Hongjun looked out, he spied someone standing motionless atop the steep cliff opposite his window. Puzzled, he set down his bowl of water and closed the window, then shrugged on his outer robe and tiptoed out of the room. He wove through the winding corridors until he reached the annex's rear entrance, pushing open the door for a clearer view of the figure standing on the lofty cliff.

It was a man.

As Hongjun watched, he strode along a suspension bridge toward the opposing cliff, where the parasol trees lining the precipice had shed nearly all their leaves. Snowflakes swirled through the air, but they seemed to shy away from the man, leaving the craggy surface of the cliff bare beneath his feet. Beyond the edge of the cliff, Hongjun could see the city of Chang'an, still blanketed by the curtain of night.

Hongjun shivered as he left the annex behind and slowly ascended the cliff. The man's hair was as red as a flame, and he was wearing a regal, coppery-gold robe belted at the waist with a pair of fiery tail feathers that trailed to the ground. His robe hung loosely from his shoulders, revealing the fair skin and powerful muscles of his naked torso.

Hongjun could scarcely believe his eyes. “Dad?”

Chong Ming slowly turned and met his eyes. Hongjun was about to rush toward him when a frown creased Chong Ming’s brow and he inhaled sharply. “What…what’s happened to your ear?!” he demanded, outraged.

Hongjun’s hand instinctively went to his ear, still covered in bandages, but Chong Ming grabbed his wrist in a grip that brooked no protest. He forced Hongjun to stand straight before him and began to unravel the bandages. Hongjun winced in pain. “Dad! Not so rough!”

“How did this happen?!” Chong Ming’s voice was practically a roar.

Hongjun stared up at Chong Ming without a word. Despite his concern, Chong Ming steadied himself and raised his left hand. There was a flash of red light accompanied by the faint trill of phoenix song as he pressed his palm to the side of Hongjun’s face. With a slight twist of his outstretched fingers, Hongjun’s wound healed, his ear emerging good as new.

“See? All better now,” Hongjun said with a smile.

“You…” They had been reunited for all of a moment, yet Chong Ming was already about to expire from anger. It took him a long time to master himself.

“I used to fall and scrape my knees all the time as a child,” Hongjun pointed out.

“This is comparable to a skinned knee?!” Chong Ming hissed.

Hongjun beamed at Chong Ming, his eyes taking on a watery sheen. “What are you doing here?”

Chong Ming sucked in a breath as he studied the youth before him. Hongjun’s hair stood on end under his careful examination—but he had missed Chong Ming so much; he just wanted to be close to him. He reached out to pull at Chong Ming’s feathered belt. Chong Ming subtly deflected his hand, but when Hongjun reached out again, he stayed still, allowing Hongjun to tug on his belt however he pleased.

“I’ve come to take you home,” Chong Ming said.

Hongjun was gobsmacked. “But I haven’t completed my three tasks yet!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Chong Ming said coldly.

Hongjun tried again. “But Chief Li, he…he’s the only one left in the Department of Exorcism.”

“Who?” Chong Ming’s aura billowed as his voice dipped dangerously. “Is that the name of the mortal standing behind you?”

Hongjun whipped around and spotted Li Jinglong beneath a parasol tree. “Chief, you’re awake? I… Dad, this is Li Jinglong! My boss!”

Li Jinglong had just woken up; he’d merely thrown a combat robe on over his undergarments and grabbed his sword. The robe whipped in the wind as he lifted his sword in his left hand and touched it to his right in greeting. “Jinglong pays his respects to Uncle.”

Chong Ming didn't so much as glance in his direction. "Are you coming with me or not?"

"Dad, listen…" Hongjun tugged on Chong Ming's tail feathers to pull him closer, and Chong Ming lifted a hand to smack him.

A frisson of worry shot through Li Jinglong at the sight of Chong Ming's raised hand, but Hongjun knew Chong Ming's harsh exterior belied his soft heart. He threw himself at Chong Ming and clambered onto his back.

"Get down!" Chong Ming said sternly. He plucked Hongjun from his shoulders and motioned for him to stand up straight.

"Hongjun," Li Jinglong said uneasily.

Hongjun smiled. "Dad, I gave the heart lamp to the wrong person. It's inside Li Jinglong now."

"You got the wrong person? So be it."

"I also got rid of the yao king…" Hongjun began.

Chong Ming cut him off with brutal efficiency. "The human realm has long since become a cesspool. I said it before in Yaojin Palace: I will not return to Chang'an. Do not get carried away by wishful thinking."

Li Jinglong felt as if a great weight had lifted off his shoulders.

"I haven't figured out who killed my—" Hongjun tried again.

"Your aspirations have grown," Chong Ming observed. "I understand. You are inventing all these excuses because you do not wish to give up the splendors of the human realm."

Hongjun fell silent. Chong Ming continued, "Very well. Just today, Qing Xiong warned me that you would be reluctant to come home with me. I refused to believe him, hence my pointless actions tonight. You may remain in the human realm hereafter, serving your own desires. Follow in your father's footsteps and enjoy this dazzling mortal world of sensual pleasures."

"Dad, that's not how it is…" Hongjun hurried to explain.

"Is that so?" Chong Ming asked, grim. "How is it, then? I'm listening."

"Chang'an is a wonderful place, w-with all sorts of food to eat and fun things to do," Hongjun stuttered. "There's plenty of room at the Department of Exorcism. There's a parasol tree there—if you stay with me for a few days, you'll see. Also, I…I want to…"

Hongjun suddenly realized that no matter what he said, it would be useless. He was no longer the naive youth who had descended the Taihang Mountains. As a child, he'd never understood why fledgling birds left their nests, never to return. He'd once asked Chong Ming about it, but Chong Ming never offered straight answers to any of his questions. Now Hongjun had finally figured it out.

"It's true," Hongjun admitted. "I've grown attached to the mortal realm. But I can't bear to lose you either. Could the chief come stay with us—"

“Who will you choose: the human standing behind you or me?” Chong Ming demanded, cutting him off again. “I will not allow a mortal to take a single step into Yaojin Palace.”

“Uncle,” Li Jinglong interjected hastily, “since Hongjun arrived in Chang’an, there hasn’t been a day he didn’t miss you. He’s young yet; it’s natural that he wants to go out and see the world.”

“Will you choose your world of mortals? Or will you choose me?” Chong Ming hadn’t looked at Li Jinglong even once.

Hongjun took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. “Dad, I can’t bear to lose you. If you’re making me choose…”

Deep down, it seemed Hongjun had already made his choice. He glanced back at Li Jinglong, his heart heavy with sorrow.

“Go home with your dad,” Li Jinglong said. “I’ll come find you in the Taihang Mountains when I can, Hongjun.”

When Hongjun turned back to Chong Ming, the man had already folded his fingers in a sword seal, fire bursting from his fingertips as he slashed them toward the long plumes hanging from his belt.

The belt split in two with a sizzle. Chong Ming turned and leaned back, letting himself fall over the edge of the cliff. Flames erupted around him as he hung in midair, illuminating the last hours of night, and shook out his feathers, transforming into the luminous form of a true phoenix. His cry echoed through the mountains, and with a gentle beat of his wings, he soared into the sky without a backward glance.

“Dad!” Hongjun screamed wildly as he caught the severed plume, dashing after Chong Ming. Li Jinglong grabbed him tightly, dragging him back from the cliff’s edge with no regard for his own safety.

“Dad!” Hongjun burst into tears as he clutched the tail feather. “Why?! I said I’d go home with you, so why?!”

After swallowing back his upset for an entire evening, Hongjun finally broke down crying. He couldn’t make sense of Chong Ming’s heartless rejection; he struggled to break free, but Li Jinglong held him tightly. Between sobs, Hongjun shouted, “Why?! Why don’t you want me anymore?!”

Li Jinglong sighed deeply. “Hongjun, don’t be sad,” he said, voice low. “I’ll go with you to the Taihang Mountains. We’ll leave tomorrow, I promise.”

Hongjun gasped harshly. He was exhausted, yet his fingers never loosened their grip on the tail feather even when it glowed red and slowly shrank down to the size of an ordinary phoenix plume. The snowflakes drifting around them gave the feather a wide berth.

All was silent and still, save for the faint stirring of snowflakes dancing deep within the valley like silkworms nibbling on leaves and spinning their thread; like the rising tide sweeping through sand as the world turned; like the wind weaving through bamboo forests and rustling tens of thousands of leaves; like a waterfall of cloud cascading from the sky and wreathing the mountains in mist.

The snow fluttered down from the sky uninterrupted, scattering over the ground. Despite the brisk wind, the snow melted the moment it touched down on the Divine Land. The snowmelt sank into the earth, where it would, with the turn of seasons, give rise to flowers and tender leaves. Soon spring would arrive, and caterpillars would wrap themselves in cocoons to become butterflies while returning migratory birds winged through the sky, disappearing into the sea of clouds to summer in the mountains. Then, at last, the snow would return once more, a fine powder drifting gently toward the world below.

Daybreak found Hongjun in bed, with Li Jinglong lying on the ground beside him. Once he had managed to calm down, Hongjun had fallen into the deep slumber of the truly exhausted. Li Jinglong, on the contrary, had already been suffering from a head-splitting hangover and struggled to go back to sleep. He sat up from time to time to check that Hongjun was really asleep and not lying awake dwelling on his sadness.

After tossing and turning for hours, Li Jinglong at last managed to doze late in the morning. He'd just drifted off when a shrill scream in the distance shattered the silence.

"Ahhh! A monster!"

Startled awake, Li Jinglong grabbed the Sword of Wisdom from the table and staggered out. "Where's the monster?!"

A group of maidservants were shrieking hysterically as they scrambled out of the dining hall, tripping over their own feet. Li Jinglong skidded in with sword in hand, only to find the carp yao sitting stupidly on the table, looking around with groggy eyes—evidently, the fish had just woken up too.

Li Jinglong sagged back against the door and pressed a hand to his brow, his headache returning with a vengeance. "Don't be scared, he's tame… Where's the oblivion pollen?"

The carp yao dragged himself out to administer the oblivion pollen, and seconds later the screaming turned into sneezing. The maidservants' eyes glazed over, and they looked at each other in confusion. The carp yao seized his opportunity and scuttled away.

Li Jinglong smoothed a hand down his disheveled outer robe. He had turned back toward the room to check whether Hongjun had woken when the carp yao piped up, "Hey, Chief Luckless, where are Mergen and the others? Why are they all gone?!"

"Don't start," Li Jinglong said with a pained expression, his brow twisting into a knot. "Give me a moment."

"Where are they?" the carp yao repeated. "Where's Hongjun?" He followed Li Jinglong all the way back down the corridor until they arrived at Li Jinglong's door, at which point Hongjun, head pounding something fierce, stumbled out to wash up.

Li Jinglong stopped, his eyes filling with concern, but Hongjun smiled. “Morning, Chief.”

The carp yao hurried forward. “What are you doing in Li Jinglong’s room again? What happened last—”

Hongjun grabbed a mung bean cake and stuffed it into the carp yao’s mouth before wandering off to the well to wash his face.

The carp yao bounded into Li Jinglong’s room, only to run back out again moments later. Holding Chong Ming’s feather aloft in one hand and pointing at it with the other, his mouth still full of pastry, the carp yao garbled a string of malformed syllables that might have been *Chong Ming was here?*

“We’re leaving today,” Li Jinglong said. “It’s only half a month’s journey to the Taihang Mountains.”

Hongjun, crouched by the well in the courtyard, glanced up at Li Jinglong, a conflicted look in his eyes.

“I promised,” Li Jinglong said in earnest.

“Chief,” Hongjun said around a mouthful of foam as he brushed his teeth, “I’m not going back to the Taihang Mountains. My dad will pick on you.”

“We’ll have a proper talk with your dad,” Li Jinglong countered. “There’s no need for us to quarrel. Worse comes to worst, I can just run away, right?”

The carp yao swallowed the dry pastry with difficulty. “His Majesty must be jealous!” he declared. “Li Jinglong! Not only did you carry off his son, you two act so lovey-dovey with each other too. You’re lucky he didn’t burn you to a crisp last night. Admit it—you’ve fallen for our Hongjun, haven’t you?! Who are you trying to fool?”

Both men blushed red as the carp yao tore right through the paper-thin pretense between them. Hongjun remained squatting at the well while Li Jinglong stood in the corridor, awkwardly staring at each other as the silence stretched.

After a long moment, Li Jinglong said, “Let’s eat breakfast. You can take your time thinking things over, but I’m serious about taking you home.”

With those parting words, he turned around and dashed off. Hongjun stared after him with wide eyes. He found himself recalling their encounter in the hot springs the day before. *Li Jinglong has such a nice body… Wait, what am I thinking?!*

The carp yao bounced over. “Hongjun, I am compelled to remind you: That bastard Li Jinglong is full of tricks. He’s had impure intentions toward you from the start, and now he’s sowing discord between you and your dad—”

“Zhao Zilong! You’re such a blabbermouth! Shut up!” Hongjun finally snapped; he scooped the carp yao into a wooden basin and chucked the whole thing across the courtyard, fish and all.

Li Jinglong studied Hongjun carefully over breakfast and concluded he really was in better spirits. Young folk were always like this: When beset by troubles, they

felt the entire weight of Mount Tai was pressing down on their shoulders, only to recover with a single good night's sleep.

"If I want to return to the Taihang Mountains, I have to find Qing Xiong," Hongjun was saying. "He'll take me up there. Without his help, we'll never reach Yaojin Palace."

"Where should we look?" Li Jinglong asked absently. "With the yao king vanquished, we've no other cases on our hands. Instead of sitting around the department, I might as well escort you home. It'll be a good opportunity for me to see the great natural wonders of the world anyway. I've never set foot out of Guanzhong, but I've always heard the divine land of our nation is filled with strange and magnificent sights. Thanks to you, maybe I'll see them with my own eyes."

"Qing Xiong was that golden-winged great peng," Hongjun admitted.

"In that case, I'd better make sure to thank him properly," Li Jinglong said with a smile.

The carp yao interjected from where he was eating an egg over rice. "Li Jinglong, you've been smiling an awful lot lately. Something good happen?"

Hongjun ignored him. "But…where can we find him?" he wondered with a frown.

"My guess is there's a fish here who knows," Li Jinglong answered.

Hongjun blinked in confusion. The two of them turned to look at the carp yao, who stared blankly back at them as he clutched his bowl, mouth agape. "What're you looking at me for?"

Li Jinglong arched a brow as he studied the carp yao with a touch of disdain. "The other day when Hongjun sent you to find help, where did you go? Could it be that someone detained you for interrogation?"

"I told you, I went grocery shopping," the carp yao said.

"Grocery shopping?" Hongjun repeated in surprise, sensing something fishy. "But you never go grocery shopping. How would you even buy them—who on earth would sell groceries to a fish?"

The carp yao had never been a good liar. Seeing that his cover was blown, he reached for the oblivion pollen.

"Are you kidding me?!" Li Jinglong was incredulous. "That oblivion pollen was purchased with my money!"

The carp yao's hand froze.

Furious at his deception, Hongjun snapped, "Zhao Zilong! What else have you been hiding from me?"

"Nothing! I haven't hidden anything!" The carp yao pleaded his case. "Master Qing Xiong told me to keep it a secret, so I didn't dare say a word."

The whole story at last came tumbling out: When the carp yao had gone to find the other exorcists the night they'd battled the fox yao, he'd been snatched up by a hawk and taken to the city's outskirts. When the bird finally let him go, he was

stunned to find Qing Xiong standing before him. Qing Xiong had asked the carp yao a number of questions before flying away. The carp yao had then hurried back to the city on foot, resulting in his conspicuous tardiness.

Hongjun was astonished by this revelation, but Li Jinglong seemed to have long guessed as much.

"What did Qing Xiong say?" Hongjun asked. "Zhao Zilong, you—! Speak up!"

"He asked where the fox yao was hiding and how close you were to defeating it. And he told me not to worry—he'd come to your rescue."

"Like hell he came to my rescue!" Hongjun nearly flipped the table. If not for Li Jinglong's heart lamp, the Department of Exorcism would have been completely wiped out.

"Master Qing Xiong knew that with Chief Luckless—" the carp yao stammered. "I mean, Chief Li's heart lamp, you wouldn't be in much danger. But it was necessary to face adversity. Otherwise, the chief would never be able to activate the heart lamp, right? Master Qing Xiong said the heart lamp is very, very, *very* important."

Li Jinglong listened without comment.

"Where is he now?" Hongjun asked sulkily. "Tell me the truth."

"He said he'd come find you soon. I swear that's the truth! They're all birds —they're always flapping around; how am I supposed to know where he is?! Hongjun! Don't be angry! I'll kowtow and apologize!"

After watching the carp plunk his head loudly against the table's edge a few times, Hongjun had no choice but to let the matter go.

Chapter 43:
Fish of the North Sea

LI JINGLONG SUGGESTED they return to Chang'an right away and find something delicious to eat while they waited for Qing Xiong to show himself. Hongjun finally set aside his worries from the night before and left Mount Li with the carp yao on his back. No matter where they chose to wait, the golden-winged peng would find them—but he felt most at ease in the Department of Exorcism.

Snow had fallen over Chang'an the previous night, but it hadn't stuck. By noon, the streets were covered in slush, and the eaves dripped with snowmelt. Li Jinglong took Hongjun and the carp yao to Dragon's Gate and ordered a full table of sumptuous dishes. The chief had money now; there was no more need for him to order plain water. Hongjun again lamented that A-Tai and the others were gone. Had the two of them known a little earlier, they could have sent their companions off with a proper farewell dinner.

Hongjun and Li Jinglong chatted about plans for the New Year's holidays as they ate. After last night, their relationship seemed to have undergone a subtle shift. Before, everyone would squabble and roughhouse, but Li Jinglong always stood slightly apart as their superior. Now that it was just the two of them, Li Jinglong treated Hongjun with all the familial intimacy of an elder brother.

"If Qing Xiong doesn't come, doesn't that mean you won't be able to go home for New Year's?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun grinned. "We don't celebrate the New Year at Yaojin Palace. What about you? Will you be going home?"

"I used to live with my cousin's family. I'd much rather stay at the Department of Exorcism for the holidays than live under someone else's roof."

Hongjun knew Li Jinglong considered their headquarters his home, but he had also come to understand that only a place with family deserved the name. Without their companions, the deserted Department of Exorcism would be just another building. When Chong Ming had left Hongjun behind last night, it had probably given Li Jinglong a bit of hope that he wouldn't be so awfully lonely.

They had finished their meal and were on their way out of the West Market when they spotted a long queue of people outside a shop next to the bookstore.

Hongjun instinctively associated any line with some delicious delicacy. "Are they selling something tasty?"

Torn between laughter and tears, Li Jinglong asked, "Didn't you just eat?"

"I'm only seventy percent full," Hongjun said, patting his stomach.

Li Jinglong sighed and got in line with Hongjun to buy whatever it was. He marveled—somehow he always ended up waiting on Hongjun, even though he was the one in charge. Who was the superior here, and who the subordinate? When he reached the front of the line, however, he found it was a fortune-telling booth. A pair of banners hung at the entrance; the left read *A Free and Unfettered Life* while

emblazoned on the right were the words *Wandering Heaven and Earth*.

"There's a fortune-telling booth here?" Li Jinglong blinked in surprise.

"His fortunes are incredibly accurate!" a man standing in line replied. "He arrived in Chang'an yesterday, and he's only staying through tomorrow!"

Hongjun craned his neck around the people in front of them. "We can go," he said when he realized it wasn't a food stall.

"Chief Li, are you here to ask about your marriage prospects or your chances of promotion?" someone joked.

Li Jinglong hesitated; he'd been planning to go home right away, but it would be a pity to miss such an opportunity. Struck by inspiration, he suggested, "Why don't we ask the whereabouts of the person you're looking for?"

Hongjun had never had his fortune told before. *Does it really work?* he wondered. He had no interest whatsoever in the future, but on second thought, he might as well join the fun.

"What are you going to ask about?" Hongjun chirped as they waited in line. Li Jinglong hadn't yet decided, but before he could say so, Hongjun continued, "Marriage?"

Li Jinglong had a sudden thought. "I want to ask about fate—about how much time fate has allotted us."

Hongjun went quiet. Li Jinglong slung an arm over his shoulders and leaned against him, no different from a pair of brothers. "When we first got to know each other at the Department of Exorcism, I knew there would come a day when Mergen and the others would leave. But for some reason, I always felt that you would stay."

"I'll take you home with me to the Taihang Mountains, and when you want to return to Chang'an, we can climb back down together," Hongjun said with a smile.

It was strange—the moment the two of them joined the crowd, the line began to move rapidly. Within the brief span of their conversation, they had arrived at the door. Just as they were arguing about who should enter first—Li Jinglong was insisting that Hongjun go in before him—a voice called from inside: "Chief Li, please come in."

"He knows your name!" Hongjun whispered in amazement.

"He just has sharp ears," Li Jinglong whispered back. "He probably heard people talking outside just now."

Li Jinglong stepped into the shop. The interior was blocked by a folding screen; when he walked around it, he saw a curtain hanging over the doorway before him.

"Take a seat," a man's voice said from behind it.

Li Jinglong ducked under the curtain, and everything went quiet. It was as if he had entered a spiritual array; all sound seemed to fade as an uncanny hush settled over the world.

A fair-skinned and frail-looking young man with lips as gentle as jade sat across the table. A long black robe covered him up to his throat, and a strip of black

cloth obscured his eyes.

"The Sea of Silence," the man explained. "No one outside can hear what happens inside, and no one inside can hear what happens outside."

Li Jinglong was immediately on guard. The blindfolded man before him was versed in spiritual techniques—was he a yaoguai?

"Chief Li Jinglong of Chang'an's Department of Exorcism," the man said, his voice low. "An honor to meet you at last. You may call me Yuan Kun."

Li Jinglong hadn't expected to meet a fellow practitioner of the supernatural arts here. "And may I ask who you are, exactly?"

“There is someone waiting for you in the rear courtyard who will answer that question in due time,” Yuan Kun responded quietly. “What else would you like to ask?”

Li Jinglong found himself momentarily speechless. As he studied Yuan Kun warily, the man asked, “Didn’t you want to ask about your fate with that young man?”

“You know Hongjun? Are you a yaoguai?”

“Your fate—and the time you have together—is up to you. This will be decided by a single choice, made in the space of a heartbeat.” Yuan Kun turned his face aside. After some thought, he continued, “In the fourteenth year of Tianbao—that is, a little over a year from now—you must act with caution.”

As Li Jinglong drew in a deep breath, Yuan Kun reached out without warning and pressed his palm to Li Jinglong’s sternum, his pale fingers splayed wide. Li Jinglong instinctively flinched back. Undeterred, Yuan Kun said in a measured voice, “Take off your upper robes. Hurry, there are people waiting behind you.”

“What are you going to do?” Li Jinglong asked cautiously.

“Whether you take off your robes or not—this, too, will be decided by a single choice.”

After a few beats of silence, Li Jinglong began to loosen his robes.

“That’s right,” Yuan Kun said offhandedly. “Everything in this world is born of, and destroyed by, choices made in an instant.”

Li Jinglong unfastened his underrobe, exposing the left side of his chest. “Are you looking for the heart lamp?”

Rather than answer his question, Yuan Kun said, “Bonds broken and formed, life and death, success and failure, momentous changes that upend heaven and earth—all are decided by a series of simple, fleeting choices.”

Yuan Kun formed a sword seal with his hands and deftly drew a symbol in the air. He pushed it forward—Li Jinglong felt a searing pain as the sigil branded itself over his heart.

“What is this?!”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Yuan Kun answered.

“You—”

“The consultation is over.” Yuan Kun set his hands on the table and tipped his blindfolded face up to Li Jinglong. “Pay the fee.”

Li Jinglong frowned. “How much?”

“Leave me a note marked with your personal seal,” Yuan Kun replied. “You owe me a dead body. When the time comes, I will come and collect it myself. Write it down.”

“Whose body?!” Li Jinglong demanded in a harsh whisper.

“Write it down,” Yuan Kun repeated, arching a brow. “I’m not asking you to kill anyone. When the time comes, I will ask for the corpse of someone already

deceased. Whether you believe me or not—this too is your choice."

They faced each other across the table, Li Jinglong's breath quickening as he studied the blind man. Yuan Kun handed him a brush and smoothed a sheet of paper in front of him. As if possessed, Li Jinglong wrote down *I owe Yuan Kun a dead body*. Yuan Kun pushed over a pot of cinnabar seal paste, and Li Jinglong marked the document with his fingerprint accordingly.

What am I doing? Li Jinglong wondered, recovering his senses only after lifting his thumb from the paper.

"Go to the rear courtyard," Yuan Kun instructed. "You're a good kid…but the path you walk will be long."

Li Jinglong stepped back from the table, ready to hurry out and discuss countermeasures with Hongjun against their potential new threat. He had left behind this debtor's note with his fingerprint, but as long as Li Jinglong had a conscience, even if Yuan Kun was a yaoguai, there was no way he could force Li Jinglong to kill anyone.

"Next," Yuan Kun called as Li Jinglong ducked back under the curtain, the din of the city rising once more. Li Jinglong looked toward the front door, but Hongjun didn't enter.

"Go," Yuan Kun bade him. "Can you not be at ease unless he's within sight at all times?"

Li Jinglong had no choice but to step into the rear courtyard, where a man was standing beneath the sky well.

The man was tall—about the same height as Li Jinglong—with deep-set features and pitch-black eyes that glinted dark gold. His upper body was bare, showing off a well-defined torso and wheat-colored skin, and he was wearing a regal black qun with gold embroidery that danced in the wind. His posture was relaxed, his expression amiable, yet the aura he exuded was that of a divine sovereign descending from the heavens.

Spotting Li Jinglong, the man nodded calmly in greeting. "Those who have their fortunes told typically exit through the side door," he explained graciously. "I've been waiting for you for a very long time, Li Jinglong."

Li Jinglong backed up a step, immediately worried for Hongjun's safety. *Is this the black jiao? But then, who's the guy sitting out front?*

"Oh, I'm not the black jiao," the man assured him. "There's no need to worry."

Li Jinglong was stunned. *He can read my mind? What kind of yaoguai is this?*

"That's right." The man nodded. "The one sitting out front can see your future, and I can read your mind. We're not really yaoguai—granted, I *have* eaten people on occasion, but I'm not planning on eating anyone now."

"Who are you?" Li Jinglong asked, examining the stranger. His naked torso and the qun around his waist reminded Li Jinglong of the man on the cliffs of Mount Li the night before. Their qun were similar in style—could it be…?

“Correct,” Qing Xiong said pleasantly. “But there’s no time to waste. Let’s spar a few rounds—it’ll save my little nephew from getting his ear sliced up again.”

Inside the shop, Hongjun walked around the folding screen, glancing this way and that. “Is anyone here?”

“This way,” Yuan Kun called out from behind the curtain. “What are you looking at? Don’t go toward the sky well. You can’t blame me if you blow his cover.”

Hongjun blinked in confusion. “Are you the fortune teller?” he asked as he stepped behind the curtain and took a seat.

“You must be a genius,” Yuan Kun said.

Laughing, Hongjun looked down and spotted Li Jinglong’s writing on a slip of paper. “What’s this?”

Yuan Kun calmly tucked the document away. “Go on then. What do you wish to ask?”

Hongjun scratched his head. “Will I be able to see my dad again in this lifetime?”

“Your dad has a rather fiery temper, doesn’t he?”

Hongjun hesitated briefly. “It was my fault for upsetting him.”

“All worries originate in the heart,” Yuan Kun said. “There is no need to get worked up over nothing. Your dad still loves you.”

“Liar.” The rims of Hongjun’s eyes turned red. “He yelled at me just last night.”

“What else do you want to ask?”

“I want to ask…” Hongjun began awkwardly. “Will I be able to go home? And if I do go home, will I be separated from the chief?”

“That depends on where you consider your home to be,” Yuan Kun answered.

Hongjun was still puzzling over this when Yuan Kun prompted him yet again: “What else do you want to ask?”

After a moment of thought, Hongjun said, “That’s it.”

Unable to help himself, Yuan Kun blurted, “The carp behind you—it’s high time he started cultivating and accumulating merits.”

“Zhao Zilong—hey, he’s talking about you!” Hongjun scooped the carp yao out of his bag. Zhao Zilong had been in the middle of his afternoon nap. His eyes swiveled a few times, and he turned to look at Yuan Kun with his mouth agape.

“How on earth did you cultivate yourself into such a state?” Yuan Kun asked. “How repulsive.”

After a brief, stunned silence, the carp yao yelped, “The divine kun! You’re the divine kun, aren’t you?!”

Yuan Kun frowned. “Not only are you repulsive, you are also a loudmouth.”

“You…you’re the divine kun?” Hongjun was dumbfounded. “What are you doing in Chang’an? Where’s Qing Xiong?”

Hongjun knew Qing Xiong was close friends with a kun from the North Sea who rarely visited the Central Plains. But he never imagined he would meet him in Chang’an.

“All hail the divine kun!” The carp yao dropped to his knees. “This lowly fish begs the divine kun to please point him toward the correct path…”

“Are you really the divine kun? Is Qing Xiong with you? Tell me, quick! Have you seen my dad?”

Yuan Kun had reached the end of his patience. “Shut up, both of you!”

The carp yao dug through Hongjun’s bag, unearthing a packet of fish food from Mount Li. He presented it reverently to Yuan Kun, anticipation gleaming in his round eyes. “This lowly fish offers tribute to the great divine kun… I wish to become, if not a dragon, then at least a human. Please advise me!”

“I don’t eat this stuff,” Yuan Kun snapped. He found this fish deeply irritating. “Save eighty-one people. After you have done so, come and find me. You must save them on your own, without the help of others. As for you…” Turning toward Hongjun, Yuan Kun produced a measuring stick and knocked it against the table. After a moment of consideration, he said, “In two years, you will be able to return to Yaojin Palace.”

“Really?”

“You doubt my ability?” Yuan Kun was about to truly lose his temper—Hongjun hastily waved his hands in denial. “The carp pays in cash,” Yuan Kun concluded. “Now get lost—leave the fish food. And for your payment…”

“I have money,” Hongjun offered.

“Write a statement acknowledging your debt,” Yuan Kun instructed. “You owe me a soul.”

“Huh?”

“Write it down.”

Baffled, Hongjun nevertheless wrote the note as instructed, then pressed his fingerprint onto the paper. “Finally,” Yuan Kun said as Hongjun finished, “all the pieces have been assembled.”

“Whose soul?” Hongjun asked.

“Not yours,” Yuan Kun said. “And not Li Jinglong’s either. There’s someone waiting for you in the rear courtyard—go on now.”

Utterly bewildered, Hongjun stepped into the rear courtyard. He let out a whoop of joy at the sight of Qing Xiong and dashed toward him.

Qing Xiong had assumed a fighting stance and was in the middle of teaching Li Jinglong a set of boxing forms. Hearing Hongjun’s cry, he turned and held out a hand, stopping Hongjun in his tracks with a finger pressed to the youth’s forehead.

“Where’s my dad?” Hongjun asked.

“I don’t know,” Qing Xiong said. He executed the final two forms and turned to Li Jinglong. “Got it?”

“Yes. Thank you for the lesson,” Li Jinglong said, cupping his hands.

Qing Xiong looked at Hongjun. “You used to pester me all the time, saying I never taught you martial arts. Well, I’m teaching you now, so watch carefully. Li Jinglong, you must remind him to practice in your spare time.”

Li Jinglong promised he would before stepping back a few paces to watch.

Pulling himself together, Hongjun followed after Qing Xiong, who had just finished walking Li Jinglong through a set of forms called the Peng’s Endless Flight. Facing Hongjun, Qing Xiong shifted his posture and opened his hands into flat blades.

“This is a set of palm-strike techniques your father used when he was alive. They’re to be used in combination with the pentacolor sacred light—only then will you unleash their true power.”

Hongjun hummed in acknowledgment, not daring to interrupt as Qing Xiong continued his explanation. “There are only two forms in the set. The first is ‘release’ and the second is ‘gather.’ Although there are certainly conditions that limit its effectiveness, the pentacolor sacred light is the strongest spiritual device in the world and holds the powers of both the demonic and the divine.”

Qing Xiong threw his hands outward, fingers spread. “Upon release, its power is like the eternal gate of profundity, infinite and all-encompassing. When gathered, like the mustard seed that stores the vastness of the mountain within its confines, it can transform all—even a great chain of peaks or a wide expanse of sea—into a void of nothingness.”

Hongjun followed Qing Xiong’s movements, his eyes trained on his spread hands as his palms glowed with sacred light.

“These two forms comprise countless variations,” Qing Xiong said. “If properly gathered, its practitioner can raise towering waves or smash entire mountains; if properly released, they can block lightning strikes or bear the weight of Mount Tai.”

Hongjun stepped back and turned again. Qing Xiong moved like a golden peng spreading its wings, while Hongjun followed like a graceful peacock. The two made for a lovely sight as they progressed smoothly through the stances.

“Got it?” Qing Xiong asked.

“I think so. Just now, the divine kun said…”

“Don’t forget to practice,” Qing Xiong interrupted. “My dear nephew—until we meet again.”

With that, he turned and rose into the air in a burst of golden light. There was a loud *bang* in the entrance hall as a beam of darkness likewise shot skyward. The two great yaoguai disappeared as mysteriously as they’d come, leaving Li Jinglong and Hongjun to stare at each other in bewilderment.

The afternoon wore on, yet Hongjun remained in shock. He followed Li Jinglong back to the Department of Exorcism as though walking through a dream. The carp yao staggered behind him on unsteady feet, as if having lost his way.

"What did Yuan Kun do to you?" Hongjun asked Li Jinglong when they returned.

"He marked the area over the heart lamp with a sigil."

"Can I see?" Hongjun examined the flame-like sigil marring Li Jinglong's chest like a fresh bruise. "Maybe it's a spiritual technique to protect your heart… What did Qing Xiong teach you?"

Li Jinglong smiled. "Some hand-to-hand combat and swordplay techniques."

"Zhao Zilong, are you okay?" Hongjun called out to the carp yao.

The divine kun's disdain had left the carp yao dejected. Clutching his relic of Great Master Xuanzang, he muttered, "I need to go save people."

"Chief Li!" Shouts reached them from the alleyway. "Chief Li of the Department of Exorcism!"

Recognizing the speaker as Huang Yong of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, Li Jinglong went to allow the man through the spelled door.

Huang Yong bustled in, wrapped in a thick fur cloak and huffing as he caught his breath. "Something terrible's happened in the northwest. The messenger hawk just arrived after flying a full day and night. I need you—and you—to come with me to the Ministry of War. Let's go, let's go—all of you, come with me!"

Li Jinglong's brow twisted into a knot.

Chong Ming, Qing Xiong, and Yuan Kun stood on the roof of Daming Palace as the setting sun bathed the glazed tiles in brilliant golden light.

"Let us see how his fortune plays out," Yuan Kun said. "But we must remember that even the best-laid plans may go awry when Mara is resurrected."

Chong Ming's voice was a furious hiss. "I should take him back to Yaojin Palace. No matter how powerful the demon seed may be, what can it do if he never leaves the mountain? We wouldn't even *be* in this situation if Kong Xuan had listened to me and stayed in Yaojin Palace instead of falling for that woman!"

"Chong Ming, it's natural for a fledgling to leave the nest," Qing Xiong said calmly. "The day you attain nirvana is close at hand. When that time comes, who will protect him?"

"He passed the heart lamp to the wrong person," Yuan Kun murmured, the tied-off ends of his blindfold fluttering in the wind. "But Li Jinglong's appearance may be a favorable turning point. So long as he holds firm…"

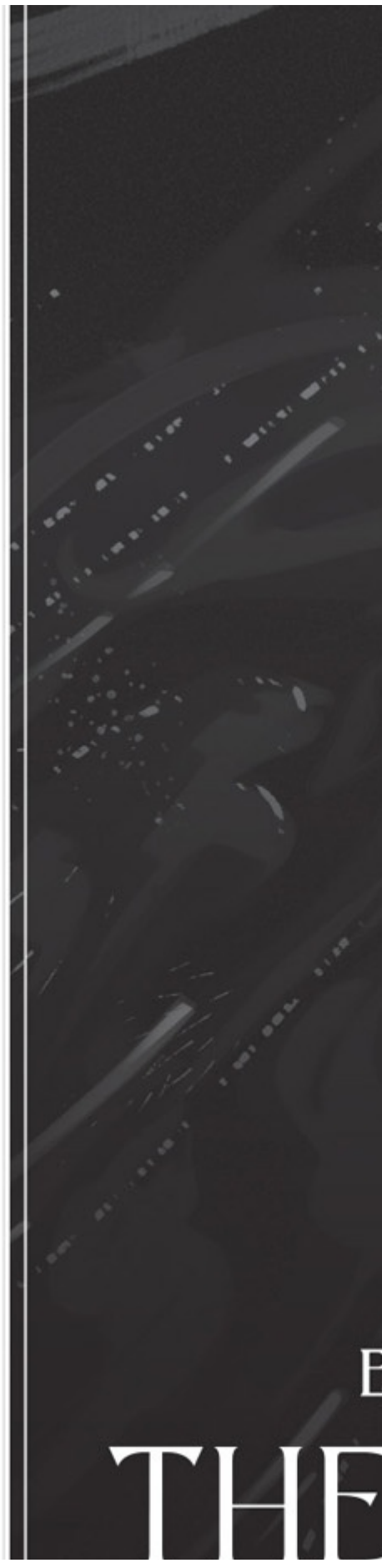
"I will *not* place my hopes in a mortal man!" Chong Ming thundered.

"So you made Hongjun choose," Qing Xiong said. "No one's allowed to be happy if you're not happy—as if that fixes anything."

Chong Ming glared. "You—"

“You heard what Hongjun said today,” Qing Xiong continued. “Is that not enough for you?”

Yuan Kun scowled. “You birds are so annoying,” he said crossly. “Chirping and chattering away all day, when our most pressing problem is finding the black jiao. Where on earth did it go?”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Chapter 44:
The Mysterious Massacres

FRESH SNOW drifted through Chang'an, laying bricks of white jade over every home.

As the snow melted from the plum trees that afternoon, Li Jinglong and Hongjun arrived at the garden in the Ministry of War. A number of cabinet ministers were sitting around a table enjoying the fragrance of the plum blossoms and drinking tea. Among them were the Minister of Justice, Wen You, a high official of the third rank dressed in the purple robes of his station, and—most startling of all—the crown prince, Li Heng, who occupied the seat of honor.

Li Heng offered them a slight nod. "Jinglong, Hongjun, take a seat."

"This is the fourth military dispatch we've received this month," a minister continued as Wen You handed Li Jinglong a bowl of deep green tea, which he passed to Hongjun. Hongjun took it glumly, still preoccupied by Qing Xiong's words and Chong Ming's departure the night before.

Li Jinglong recognized the official in purple robes and a gold-embellished belt sitting at the crown prince's side. His former superior Hu Sheng always bowed and scraped whenever he met this man: the Minister of War, Fan Shen.

"Gan Prefecture, Yi Prefecture, Sha Prefecture—in every case, the attackers struck at night and left nothing but ruin in their wake. There have been no survivors," Fan Shen said. "Women, children, the elderly—all were killed, without exception. The death toll has exceeded a hundred thousand. According to the eyewitness accounts of Hexi Army scouts, it's hell on earth over there!"

Listening, Li Jinglong's expression turned severe; even Hongjun shook off his distraction. The garden inside the Ministry of War was lovely on this sunny, early winter day, yet the conversation was heart-stopping in its gravity.

Li Jinglong frowned slightly as Wen You asked, "Has General Geshu Han, the Duke of Liang, sent no troops to investigate?"

"He's sent troops to the Great Wall three times," Fan Shen said. "We still don't know whether it's the Uyghurs or the Göktürks rising in rebellion, but they've massacred four cities in a month, coming and going without a trace. General Geshu Han's subordinates are doing what they can, but the ground is frozen beyond Yumen Pass—there's nothing for them to track."

"Jinglong, what do you think?" Li Heng suddenly asked.

All eyes converged on Li Jinglong.

Though he had only been listening a short while, Li Jinglong had grasped the basics of the situation. Regardless of what the others thought, the crown prince must have summoned him here because he suspected yao involvement. "If I may be so bold as to ask three questions," he began.

Every one of the officials present outranked Li Jinglong, and none of them believed in the supernatural. Still, the crown prince could believe what he wished;

no one objected, merely motioning for Li Jinglong to continue.

"First, what weapons did the enemy use to kill the soldiers defending the cities? Second, what direction did the attacks come from? These are all large cities—it's strange that no one managed to escape. Third, what does the court have to say about this matter?"

When Li Jinglong had finished, the crown prince glanced at the others with a smile.

Fan Shen was first to respond. "These questions weigh on our minds as well. It's completely inexplicable. Our most vulnerable civilians killed, while the soldiers who fought the attackers—young men in the prime of their lives—seem to have disappeared overnight without a trace."

Astonished by this revelation, Hongjun set down his teacup and began to think in earnest. What the minister described didn't seem like the work of any human army.

"The enemy took no money or provisions," Wen You added. "The Court of Judicial Review is completely stumped by the case, and as for the rest of the government…"

Wen You looked to Li Heng for help, but the crown prince merely took a deep breath and said nothing.

"Aside from these, have there been any other leads?" Li Jinglong asked.

"Nothing," Li Heng answered.

A while later—time enough to burn through a stick of incense—Li Heng, Li Jinglong, and Hongjun stepped out of the Ministry of War.

"Chancellor Yang has returned to court from his travels," Li Heng explained. "The military reports are currently in his hands. A hundred thousand military and civilian deaths can be either downplayed or exaggerated as needed, but the annihilation of four cities on the border is a matter of grave importance. There are many strange details in this case, yet everyone thinks it's simply Uyghur raiders pillaging along the border before winter sets in."

Li Jinglong blew out a breath, his brow creasing. "It can't be Uyghur raiders. Why would they leave the cities' riches untouched?"

"Do you suspect yao are involved?" Li Heng asked.

"We'll have to go take a look," Hongjun responded. "It's hard to tell without knowing more."

"Our time is limited," Li Heng said. "A Uyghur envoy will arrive in the capital come spring—two and half months. If there's no other evidence by then, I'm afraid the Right Chancellor will take these attacks as an excuse to use military force against the Uyghur Khaganate."

"Would His Majesty agree to such a thing?" Li Jinglong asked, suddenly apprehensive.

Watching Li Heng gaze at Li Jinglong without a word, Hongjun felt a shiver of danger. Li Heng nodded. "And here I thought the worst of our misfortunes were

over. I never dreamed something like this would happen. This time, I will have to rely entirely on the Department of Exorcism. Speaking of which, where are your other subordinates?"

Li Jinglong grimaced. "The yao king is dead, and they have other important tasks they must attend to, so they're long gone. I've only Hongjun left for company," he said, placing a hand on Hongjun's shoulder.

Li Heng seemed unsurprised. "We are very alike indeed," he mused.

"Even as the mountains wear thin and the streams run dry, an opportunity is sure to come," Li Jinglong said. "There are sure to be those who will help you."

"Are you not talking about yourself?" Li Heng asked, smiling as he handed over an envelope. "Here are my written orders. When you arrive in Hexi, find General Geshu Han—now, go. I await your good news."

Listening to the two of them speak in riddles, Hongjun was utterly flummoxed. When Li Heng mounted his horse and took his leave, he turned to Li Jinglong. "What did he mean when he said you're 'very alike'?"

"His Highness means that his situation is very similar to mine. After spending years leading military campaigns on the borders, he finally managed to return to the capital after Li Linfu's fall only for a new opponent to appear in the form of Yang Guozhong."

A short while later at the Department of Exorcism, Li Jinglong was in his room, packing his bag. Already changed into formfitting combat robes, Hongjun perched on the railing beneath the eaves of the corridor and watched him, a travel pack slung over his back.

"The moment conflict erupts between Great Tang and the Uyghur Khaganate, Yang Guozhong will use it as an excuse to send His Highness back to the front lines," Li Jinglong said as he walked by Hongjun to gather his clothes, stirring up a breeze that brushed Hongjun's face with its passage.

Hongjun had never heard Li Jinglong speak at length about politics. Little by little, he had learned that conflicts between mortals stemmed from the desire for "power"—since time immemorial, humans had had an infinite capacity for greed.

"Will the two of them fight each other?" Hongjun asked in surprise. "Wouldn't Yang Guozhong be committing treason?"

"He wouldn't dare." Li Jinglong felt torn between laughter and tears. "The Yang family just wants to survive."

Yang Guozhong appeared to be in a position of power now, but his influence stemmed from the imperial favor enjoyed by his cousin, Yang Yuhuan. He was an unreasonable and overbearing man who had made no shortage of enemies in court. What was more, the Yang family's influence would surely be affected by the fox yao case—both with regard to the matter of the scholars and the Duchess of Guo. When Li Longji passed away and Li Heng ascended the throne, the first item on the new emperor's agenda would be holding the Yang family to account. Thus, to protect his kin, Yang Guozhong had no choice but to set himself against the crown

prince.

"But we might not end up fighting the Uyghurs," Hongjun pointed out.

"Mm-hmm." Li Jinglong counted out their travel expenses and walked past Hongjun once more. "Perhaps not—but perhaps he'll send the crown prince to defend Liang Prefecture again. With the prince out of the way, the chancellor is free to arrange the court as he pleases."

Hongjun felt he had learned a great deal. "In that case, if they do end up fighting, whose side are we on?"

Li Jinglong was speechless.

The carp yao couldn't let this lie. "Hongjun, are you an idiot? Who would you help if not the crown prince? When humans undergo a dynastic change, you think you should offer a helping hand to traitorous rebels instead of assisting the rightful Son of Heaven? Great Tang's fate has yet to run its course!"

"But Noble Consort Yang gave me pastries…"

Li Jinglong kneaded his brow. What would the people say if they found out the noble consort coaxed Hongjun into stabbing the crown prince in the back simply by feeding him pastries?

"The crown prince gave you a string of Hetian jade beads; have you already forgotten about those?" Li Jinglong said, scowling as he stuffed more clothes into his bag.

The carp yao shouldered his own pack and bounded into the corridor. "It's time I bid farewell to you two as well…"

"Absolutely not!" Li Jinglong snapped.

"Where are you going?" Hongjun asked, mystified.

After receiving the divine kun's advice, the carp yao had spent two and a half hours in a depressive gloom before concluding that, as a fish, he simply couldn't go on like this. He would go out and save eighty-one people just as the divine kun instructed, gaining merits and attaining salvation for himself through delivering others from suffering.

"So far, I've saved Noble Consort Yang," the carp yao said. "I'm not sure if she counts though… I'd better start counting from the next person."

"You're really leaving?" Hongjun asked. "Be careful you don't get caught or someone will try to braise you in soy sauce again."

The carp yao considered this for a long moment. Back when he and Hongjun had journeyed down from the Taihang Mountains, he had nearly been snatched while digging up worms to eat. It was Hongjun who'd come to rescue him. Upon second thought, traveling alone was indeed far too dangerous. He promptly gave up on his plan. "In that case, we need to lay some ground rules…" the carp yao began.

"No one is going to restrict your freedoms," Li Jinglong groused. "Go fetch the oblivion pollen!"

"Is it fun in Hexi?" Hongjun asked. "Are there any good things to eat?"

"When did I say I'd be taking *you*?" Li Jinglong asked.

Thunderstruck, Hongjun wailed, “Chief! I’ve already finished packing! Do you really have the heart to leave me here, all by myself?!”

Li Jinglong hunched over his bag and busied himself folding his robes. “Didn’t you come all the way to Chang’an by yourself?”

“That was different!”

Li Jinglong’s mouth quirked as he brushed past Hongjun to fetch some official documents. “How was it different?”

“I know you now, so of course it’s different. How can you leave me behind? Look!” Hongjun patted his bag. “I’ve packed up all my things!”

In truth, Li Jinglong had indeed considered leaving Hongjun behind to look after the house—after all, it was anyone’s guess when another yaoguai might come along and make trouble. But he felt uneasy about Hongjun staying at the Department of Exorcism by himself. Hongjun would be lonely, and with no one keeping Li Jinglong company on such a long trip, he would be lonely too.

“In that case, *we’ll* have to lay some ground rules,” Li Jinglong said. “First: While we’re out, you have to listen to me.”

“But I always listen to you,” Hongjun said, bemused. “When have I ever not listened to you?”

Li Jinglong pointed at Hongjun. “Not true. For example…” But after racking his brain, he couldn’t seem to come up with a single instance. In retrospect, Hongjun really was the most obedient of his subordinates. He could only forge ahead: “Second…”

Hopping down from the railing, Hongjun reached out to tug Li Jinglong’s arm. “Chief, I’ll do whatever you say. Please take me with you!”

Li Jinglong looked at Hongjun and burst into laughter. He suddenly had the powerful urge to hug Hongjun and ruffle his hair. He lifted his arms without thinking, only to catch himself and drop them back down.

“Stop clinging,” Li Jinglong said. “I’ll take you with me, okay? Now go repack your clothes; it’s freezing in Hexi.”

Hongjun didn’t fear the cold, but at Li Jinglong’s insistence, he added a few more layers to his bag before merrily stuffing the carp yao in after them and mounting his horse.

“Don’t get too excited,” Li Jinglong warned. “We’re traveling for business, not pleasure.”

Li Jinglong led him through the West Market, where he bought a few cakes of Jiangnan tea, salt, rouge, and other sundry items. He then stopped by a jewelry shop to purchase a pearl-encrusted hairpin and a square of silk, which he wrapped the pin in before tucking it into his bag.

Hongjun watched all of this with growing confusion. “Chief, are you going to disguise yourself as a woman while we travel? Why did you buy rouge?”

“The chief has been planning this for a long time,” the carp yao piped up from behind Hongjun. “No one will recognize him once we leave Chang’an, so he

can doll himself up however he likes, right?"

The people around them in the market burst into uproarious laughter. Li Jinglong ground his teeth and snapped, "Hongjun! Insult me again, and I'll send you straight back to headquarters!"

Hongjun hastily apologized as Li Jinglong led their horses into an alleyway. The place seemed familiar—Hongjun realized with a start that they were in front of the Chen family's home. He scrambled down from his horse as Li Jinglong knocked on the door and entered the residence.

Once again, Mistress Duan stepped into the courtyard with her child in her arms. "Commandant Li? You're here again?"

"I've come to give you some money."

The woman protested at once, but Li Jinglong insisted. He handed over five gold ingots weighing ten taels in total. Unable to dissuade him, Mistress Duan accepted the money with tears of gratitude.

"You've gotten bigger," Hongjun commented as he held out a finger to the baby. The little boy was nearly ten months old and had begun to teethe. He clutched Hongjun's finger in an iron grip and stuffed it into his mouth, gnawing on it with relish.

Hongjun yelped, "Ow! Let…let go!"

Li Jinglong went to some trouble coaxing the baby to release him before turning to Mistress Duan. "We're going out of town on business, but we'll come visit again when we return. Hongjun, let's go."

It seemed Li Jinglong couldn't leave the Chen family to fend for themselves when he held the heart lamp—Hongjun was rather moved.

The two of them left Chang'an, traveling north via official roads. Hongjun loved horseback riding and took great pleasure in reining his horse around the crumbling sections of the path.

Li Jinglong, meanwhile, had been deep in thought since leaving the Ministry of War. He turned back to shout at Hongjun, "Save your energy. You'll only last a few hours if you tire yourself out like this!"

Hongjun grinned. "You haven't told me what Liang Prefecture's like yet!"

"I don't know either! I've never been out of Chang'an."

They rode on.

Two hours later, Hongjun called out, "Are we at the relay station yet?"

"Not for another four hours. We're scarcely out of Chang'an; we haven't even reached Mount Li."

Hongjun soon grew bored. When he had begun his journey from the Taihang Mountains, everything had been novel and exciting, but now that he had a greater understanding of the world, nothing was new to him anymore. It was early winter, and everywhere he looked was barren. There was nothing to do but hurry along on their journey, and if he wanted to chat with Li Jinglong, he had to yell at the top of his lungs. All in all, it was terribly monotonous.

Another two hours later, Li Jinglong guided his horse expressionlessly down the road with a slumbering Hongjun slumped against his back. On Hongjun's back, in turn, was the carp yao, mouth frozen open in sleep.

Li Jinglong's horse carried two men and a fish, while Hongjun's horse followed behind, free of any burden. Li Jinglong was utterly without words.

After yet another two hours, Li Jinglong reached back and patted Hongjun. "Hey, we're here!"

Hongjun stretched muzzily as Li Jinglong dismounted and gathered his official documents, then headed into the relay station to confirm that they were heading in the right direction and procure a room for the night. Hongjun stood outside, glancing around with bleary eyes.

Generally, when officials went out on business with their underlings, it was their subordinate's responsibility to arrange all the various matters related to travel. Yet despite being Hongjun's superior, it was Li Jinglong who gave every impression of a servant attending a rich young master with fear and reverence. Perhaps he simply wasn't destined to experience the pomp and circumstance of having a lackey clear the way for his grand arrival in this lifetime.

"Young Master," Li Jinglong called out from inside the relay station, "please come in and eat. What are you doing, standing outside in a daze?"

Hongjun perked up instantly at the prospect of food and fluttered inside. The relay station attendant glanced at Li Jinglong, then turned to Hongjun. "Young Master, this way, please."

"Two rooms, please," Li Jinglong told the attendant.

The attendant blinked in confusion. "One room," he corrected.

"Two rooms," Li Jinglong repeated.

The attendant lifted his index finger. "Each relay station only has one room for lodging. Sir, if you'd like, the young master can take the room, and you can sleep in the woodshed out back."

"It's okay, I can sleep in the shed," Hongjun said.

"How can the young master stay in the shed?" the attendant asked, appalled. "Have your family's servants no sense of propriety?"

Li Jinglong was lost for words. He had never been out of Chang'an, so he had no idea the relay stations dotting the official roads only had a single room available for lodging, reserved for wealthy merchants with government-approved travel papers or court officials reporting back to the capital. As for ordinary merchants who wished to stay the night, they were expected to make do with a folding screen in the relay station's main hall, where everyone took their meals.

"Forget it. We can sleep together," Li Jinglong grumbled.

Fortunately the room was reasonably clean, and the bed fairly large. Li Jinglong simply tidied things up, shooing Hongjun toward the inside of the bed, next to the wall. He went out and fetched a basin of water for the carp yao; after being exposed to the sun and wind all day, the poor creature had nearly dried up.

Only after he had bustled around ensuring that Young Master Hongjun was comfortable and well cared for did Li Jinglong lie down himself. *I used to be an actual young master—why have I never been treated like this before?* he wondered to himself.

"Chief?" Hongjun piped up.

"Some things on the road are going to be different from what you're used to back at home," Li Jinglong responded. "Try to make do for now."

"I can't sleep."

After riding double with Li Jinglong and sleeping the day away, Hongjun was wide awake. Li Jinglong, on the other hand, had been highly strung ever since Chong Ming had come calling the previous night. After an entire day full of unexpected developments, he was exhausted, his eyelids drooping the moment his head touched his pillow.

"Mm," Li Jinglong murmured with his eyes closed. "Then what do you want to do?"

"I was just thinking about what yaoguai might be wreaking havoc up in the north—there are three possibilities…"

"Go on," Li Jinglong said as his consciousness began to drift.

"Ancient legends describe a yaoguai called the drought fiend, which causes drought everywhere within a thousand miles of it. It's the reason most places to the west are desert."

Li Jinglong made no sound. Hongjun leaned closer and whispered, "Chief…? Are you asleep?"

He had fallen into a deep slumber. As a child at Yaojin Palace, Hongjun had always liked to play tricks on Chong Ming when he was sleeping. He watched Li Jinglong for a while, considering how best to tease him. As Hongjun examined him, he couldn't help but think that this man really was too handsome.

He got up and fetched a piece of paper, then traced a finger thoughtfully over Li Jinglong's face. Li Jinglong raised his hand without waking, pushing Hongjun's wrist away. Hongjun went to find a brush.

At nightfall, in a wilderness of withered trees, Mergen reached the banks of the Yellow River after a day of hard riding north from Mount Li. His horse was swift and agile as a divine steed: From sunup to sundown, it had run nearly two hundred miles.

"It looks like I have to head north again," Mergen sighed, his robes billowing in the freezing wind. Winter in the north was bitterly cold. When he'd left Hulun Lake months ago, he'd had four options: travel west to Mobei; go south to the Su-Hang region before turning toward Mount Heng; head to Chang'an in Guanzhong; or make his way into Shu.

Qiu Yongsi had agreed to ask after the white deer down south, while A-Tai promised to keep an eye on the Ku'ertai and Tian Shan regions. Both had urged him

to remain in Chang'an for the winter to avoid the bitterest months in the Mobei region north of the Gobi. But it would be a long wait until spring, and it was anyone's guess what new complications might arise in the interim.

Mergen carefully packed away his Department of Exorcism uniform to keep it clean and changed back into the formfitting linen hunting robes he'd worn when he first traveled south. Now these summer clothes were much too thin—no matter how fit he was, he shivered when the icy wind picked up speed. He resolved to go into town and buy a set of winter clothes once he crossed the Yellow River.

It wouldn't be long until the Yellow River froze over for the winter. Mergen led his horse to the dock and boarded the last ferry of the day. As he crossed the river, he turned a last longing gaze south toward the Central Plains.

Night had descended, but Yulin District on the northern shore remained brightly lit. Mergen huffed into his hands and rubbed them together as he strode toward a pelt shop. He was tall, handsome, and leading a horse of excellent quality; it was no surprise that he drew a number of admiring looks on the streets. When he stepped out of the shop some time later, he had changed into an animal-hide jacket and a fox fur hat. Once again dressed in the Shiwei style, he appeared all the more dashing.

Now suitably attired for the weather, Mergen retrieved a leather mask from his bag and pulled it over his face to block the wind and snow. He glanced down the street with bright eyes.

He would have to stay in Yulin for the night. Donning his gloves, Mergen turned toward the center of the city in search of some wine when a stranger with long, bedraggled hair came careening down the street, screaming wildly.

Mergen looked askance at the newcomer but didn't slow his pace as he led his horse toward a tavern.

"Hey! Stop right there!"

The lunatic crashed into a snowbank outside an apothecary as his pursuer, shouting furiously, caught up and snatched the stolen flatbread in his grasp. The lunatic shivered violently as the shopkeeper stalked away, cursing under his breath.

"Don't block the entrance!" the owner of the apothecary barked at him. "You're interfering with business! Get lost!"

The lunatic scrambled to the side on hands and feet, muttering nonsensically. After a moment of consideration, Mergen dug out some copper coins. He was about to buy the man a piece of flatbread himself when he heard him mumble, "Ghosts… ghosts…ghosts… Where's the deer? …The deer!"

Mergen's eyes widened behind his mask. Whipping around, he ran over to the lunatic, who gasped like a bellows as he dodged aside.

Mergen dropped to one knee in the snow. "What did you say just now?" he asked quietly.

"The man's out of his mind!" the apothecary owner's wife said as she tossed out a basin of water. "We haven't had a word of sense out of him since he came here from the northwest. He was yelling earlier about seeing ghosts at the Great Wall."

Mergen kept his voice low, speaking to the stranger. “What did you see? Don’t be scared.”

The lunatic stared blankly at Mergen, his eyes alert but unfocused.

Mergen murmured an incantation and pressed his palm to the man’s forehead. Little by little, the young man fell still. His eyes widened, and Mergen saw himself reflected in the stranger’s bright gaze.

“It’s okay,” Mergen said soothingly. “Don’t be afraid.”

He searched the young man’s clothes and found a small iron token tucked inside an inner pocket. The token read: *Tianshui Garrison, District Guard, Infantry No. 273*.

The apothecary owner’s wife had been watching Mergen. “Huh?” she murmured, suddenly noticing his leather mask. She called back to her husband, “Dear, come quick—isn’t this the guy from beyond the Great Wall everyone was talking about…?”

“Come on. Get up and follow me.” With a nod toward the apothecary owner’s wife, Mergen pulled the lunatic to his feet and led him away.

Chapter 45:
A Scout from the Northwest

THE LANDSCAPE became increasingly desolate as Li Jinglong and Hongjun continued northwest beyond Jiayu Pass a few days later. The official roads were buried in snow, and caravans were a rare sight as they traveled from one district to the next. Occasionally they spotted farmers strolling through their fields in the distance, looking up as the exorcists raced through the hills on their horses. Whenever they reached a new district, the towns were hives of activity, bustling with common folk who had come to stay for the winter.

The temperature dropped as they traveled. Hongjun lost any desire to ride by himself; not only was it dull, the friction from the saddle rubbing his inner thighs hurt so, so, *so* much—

Li Jinglong was at his wit's end. "Don't you have your own horse?"

"But it's so boring riding alone!"

"And stop drawing turtles on my face when I'm asleep." Li Jinglong turned back to pin Hongjun with a glare. "Do you hear me?"

Hongjun was too busy cackling to answer.

Resigned, Li Jinglong continued on with Hongjun riding behind him. After a few cycles of slowing to reorient themselves before making haste again, they finally arrived at the next relay station.

"We might have to camp near the road tomorrow night, but we should arrive in Wuwei the day after," Li Jinglong said as they dismounted.

"Chief, my legs hurt—I think they're blistered." Hand against the wall for support, Hongjun waddled slowly into their room like a duck. He wasn't accustomed to riding; his saddle had chafed the delicate skin of his thighs raw.

The frigid night wind howled outside, but the relay station attendant had built up a roaring fire, and their room was warm and cozy. The carp yao had already fallen asleep beside it. Hongjun stripped down to his white undergarments and gingerly wiped his thighs with a wet cloth. He considered taking off his shorts, but when he looked up and saw Li Jinglong so close, he felt incredibly awkward.

Li Jinglong prepared some salve and dabbed it onto a piece of gauze. He motioned for Hongjun to sit on the edge of the bed and tugged his legs closer.

"I…" Hongjun spluttered. "Chief, I can do it myself."

"Doesn't your grandfather's family live in Gua Prefecture?" Li Jinglong asked.

"That's right!" Hongjun had mentioned this to Li Jinglong in passing, but he had completely forgotten about the matter himself.

"We'll go pay our respects to General Geshu Han first." Li Jinglong pressed one hand to Hongjun's knee, taking the gauze and reaching up Hongjun's shorts with the other. Hongjun's face turned bright red, but the abraded skin on his thighs

was all toward his backside; he couldn't see it even if he bent in half, so he had no choice but to let Li Jinglong help him.

"After that, we'll go visit your uncle," Li Jinglong finished.

"My grandfather's some department gardener…" Hongjun said, trying to remember Yang Yuhuan's words.

"He's the deputy military governor of Hexi and was once the subordinate of General Xiao Song," Li Jinglong corrected absently. "Your uncle may very well be serving in the Hexi Army under Geshu Han as we speak."

A chill against his broken skin drew a gasp from Hongjun.

"Does it hurt?" Li Jinglong asked, hands steady as he applied the salve.

"It itches…" Hongjun couldn't help squirming.

Li Jinglong motioned for him to spread his legs wider. "Let me do the other side," he said. "You've broken skin here."

Hongjun met Li Jinglong's eyes. The brush of Li Jinglong's slender fingers against his thigh sent a shiver of arousal through him, and his pants began to tent against his will. Neither looked away as Li Jinglong dabbed salve onto Hongjun's right thigh.

"Should we try riding in a carriage tomorrow?" Li Jinglong asked.

But where would they find a carriage? Hongjun's embarrassment multiplied. He had insisted on following Li Jinglong on this trip, yet he only seemed to add to his troubles.

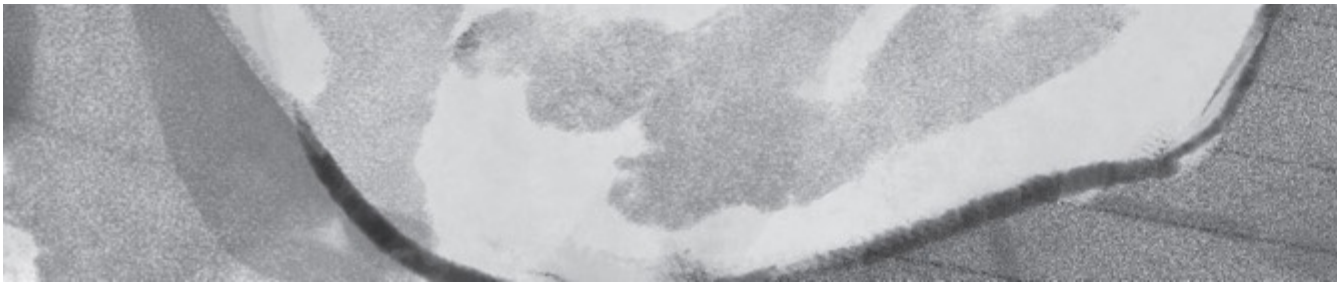
Somehow, Li Jinglong didn't seem to mind. After he finished spreading the last of the salve, Hongjun declared, "There, all done."

Hand still under Hongjun's shorts, Li Jinglong suddenly wiped a handful of salve directly between Hongjun's legs, laughing triumphantly as Hongjun yelped.

"You did that on purpose!" Hongjun's cheeks burned fiercely as he scrambled for a washcloth and unfastened his pants to mop up the excess salve.

"You're so repressed; are you saving yourself for marriage?" Li Jinglong returned, grinning as he sat with his legs crossed on the bed.

Hongjun thought he might die from embarrassment. "I don't want to get married!"



Li Jinglong studied Hongjun with keen interest. “Who knows what unfortunate girl will end up as your bride.” He shook his head with an exasperated smile. “Your father—what kind of yao was he?”

He would never have asked such a question in the past, but after traveling all this way together, they had grown as comfortable with each other as brothers. Even so, the moment the words left his mouth, Li Jinglong worried he had overstepped. He quickly amended, “I was just wondering. You don’t have to answer.”

Hongjun assured him it was okay and scooted further onto the bed. Li Jinglong settled down at his side, and the two of them sat shoulder to shoulder against the wall.

“My dad was a peacock yao,” Hongjun said.

“No wonder you’re so pretty,” Li Jinglong murmured absently. He glanced at Hongjun. “If you did want to get married, would Uncle Chong Ming…make arrangements for you to marry a beautiful yao?”

Hongjun had never considered this. “There’s no way he’d arrange a marriage for me.”

“But what about in the future?” Li Jinglong asked casually.

Hongjun was a bit stumped by the question. As someone who was neither fully human nor fully yao, what would his future look like? “Chong Ming…” he said hesitantly, “doesn’t care about that kind of thing.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Li Jinglong said with a smile.

As a child, Hongjun had never thought about his future; he had simply drifted along, a day at a time, in Yaojin Palace. He wanted to eat all the delicacies of the human realm, but that could hardly be considered his life’s ambition. If he was pressed to describe his vision for the future, it would probably be living out his days in Yaojin Palace keeping Chong Ming company.

Noticing Hongjun’s distant look and fearing he was remembering Chong Ming’s rejection, Li Jinglong urged him to lie down. “Sleep,” he said.

The snow swirled outside. Hongjun cast his gaze toward the phoenix feather lying on the table. Li Jinglong’s questions seemed to have stirred something in him; thoughts rose up one after another in his unguarded mind, drowning him in an unexpected flood on this snowy night. In all his sixteen years, this was the first time he had ever felt so lost.

What am I going to do in the future? Years from now, who will be by my side?

“What about you, Chief?”

Beside him, Li Jinglong was breathing evenly, seemingly asleep. Hongjun turned toward the wall, sinking back into thought.

“When I was your age, I was preoccupied with all sorts of things,” Li Jinglong said, his voice low.

Heart stirring, Hongjun flipped over. Li Jinglong opened his eyes and turned his head to look at him. “I didn’t want to be like everyone else—to build my career, get married when I came of age, raise kids with my wife, and live a perfectly

ordinary life."

Hongjun had drawn up one leg to keep his wounds from rubbing against each other, but he soon grew tired and rested his leg on Li Jinglong's thigh. Realizing Hongjun was afraid of exacerbating his freshly treated blisters, Li Jinglong beckoned for him to shift up a little so Hongjun's leg was draped over his waist.

"Right," Hongjun responded. "That's how I feel too. I don't know what I'll become in the future—or rather, I…"

Scooting a little closer, Li Jinglong stared up at the ceiling and said, "You're fine just the way you are. Hongjun, I… The first time I saw you…" He turned, his eyes colliding with Hongjun's before darting away in embarrassment. "There are so many things about you—things I've never had." He sighed softly, smiling with a hint of self-deprecation.

"Chief, why is your face so red?" Hongjun asked, puzzled.

Li Jinglong pressed his lips shut.

Hongjun studied Li Jinglong with a smile in his eyes. Li Jinglong looked back and examined him as well, their breaths entwining in the narrow space of the bed.

Li Jinglong had to admit that there was something inherently magnetic about Hongjun.

Seeing him always reminded him of his own youth. During the years that belonged solely to the young, he had strapped a sword—the treasure for which he'd exchanged his family's entire fortune—to his waist and searched desperately for a friend like Hongjun: someone who hailed from an impossibly ideal world with whom he could drink, make merry, and fight his enemies; a confidant who would stand with him at the top of the world and remain with him through life and death.

But Hongjun hadn't appeared at his side back then. In hindsight, his state of mind at the time was perhaps best described by Li Bai's verse: "Sword drawn, I look around, finding myself lost and alone."[12]

"You came too late," Li Jinglong said suddenly. "If only we had met three years ago."

"Three years ago, I was only thirteen."

"That's true," Li Jinglong conceded with a smile. "Still, you saved me."

"What do you mean?" Hongjun was baffled.

Li Jinglong's expression turned serious. "If we had met earlier, I might have…"

"Might have what?"

Li Jinglong leaned back, his eyes roving over Hongjun's face. It was only now that he realized what he had lost—as the river of time flowed onward, the friction of the mundane world had gradually worn away his naive warmth and enthusiasm.

"Hongjun," Li Jinglong said, solemn, "I want to ask you something."

Hongjun was wholly confused. Actually, he had been struggling to follow what Li Jinglong was saying ever since they lay down. Li Jinglong seemed to be trying to tell him something, but Hongjun couldn't make any sense of it.

"Do you like me?" Li Jinglong asked. "That day, did you mean it when you said, 'Chief, I like you so much'?"

"Of course," Hongjun answered with a smile. He liked being around Li Jinglong more than anything. The world always felt brighter when they were together.

"I like you a lot too, the way I would like a little brother…" Li Jinglong's face reddened as he spoke. "Fucking hell, I sound so sappy. Listen, when you wake up in the morning, pretend this never happened."

Li Jinglong rarely cursed. Hongjun giggled and nudged him with his foot. "Got it."

"Mm. You're my subordinate in the Department of Exorcism, but I've always seen you as a younger brother. I've never met anyone I got along with so well before, not even in the Longwu Guard."

These words really *were* sappy. No one had ever said such a thing to Hongjun before. Happiness bloomed in his chest.

"The others always joke about us, but I…I don't have any improper intentions toward you. Don't take their words to heart." Li Jinglong roughly tousled Hongjun's hair before continuing. "I don't care about other people's…comments. Some of the things they say though—try not to take them too seriously."

Hongjun was once again flummoxed. "What things?"

"Sometimes, I can't tell whether you're really dumb or just acting like it," Li Jinglong said.

Finally it clicked. Laughing, Hongjun said, "Oh—I get it! I don't have any either…"

"Of course, it can't be helped if *you* have improper intentions toward *me*." Li Jinglong began to tease Hongjun again.

"I don't! I don't! I really don't!" Hongjun protested.

"Oh? Is that so?" As Li Jinglong spoke, he took Hongjun's hand, pressed their palms together, and loosely laced their fingers.

The instant Li Jinglong clasped his hand, Hongjun's face heated as he felt himself grow hard. It was the same feeling he'd had when he taught Li Jinglong how to use the heart lamp as they rode back to Chang'an.

Li Jinglong examined Hongjun's face, a subtle smile curving his lips, before flicking his gaze downward, as if to say, *Well? Are you sure you don't have any improper intentions toward me?*

Hongjun tugged his hand out of Li Jinglong's grasp, his heart beating wildly. "Don't tease me! I—I see you as family as well… That's right, didn't I say I'd take you with me when I went home? I don't want to be separated from you, Chief."

Li Jinglong laughed. “All right, I’ll stop teasing. We’re heading out early tomorrow, so get some sleep. Some things in life don’t need to be rushed. Take your time thinking things over. You’ll figure it out eventually—at least, that’s what I did, until the day I met you.”

Li Jinglong’s eyes drifted shut. Hongjun’s head was still spinning with innumerable thoughts, but he was too tired to dwell on them; he adjusted his leg on Li Jinglong’s waist and gave himself up to sleep.

That night, an unexpected blizzard swept across the border region, blanketing everything within three hundred miles of the Great Wall in fresh snow.

As the night deepened, guests began to depart from the public bathhouse in Yulin District, leaving it mostly empty. All was silent, save for the soft strains of a songstress singing in the distance: “*Where drifts the tune of ‘The Fallen Plum Blossoms’? To the borderlands, carried by the evening wind…*”[13]

In a private room in the west wing of the bathhouse, the lunatic was soaking quietly in a wooden tub, his loose hair a dark and tangled cloud around his head.

Mergen sat outside with a towel across his knees, holding a little pot of wine in one hand and fiddling with the two Hetian jade beads Hongjun had given him—now strung on a cord—with the other.

“Are you done washing up?” Mergen asked, turning to look back. “Aren’t you hungry?”

Leaning against the washtub, the lunatic peered toward the door as Mergen rose to his feet and stepped inside to check on him. Before descending into whatever madness currently plagued him, the young man had been a soldier. He was leanly built, and after washing away the dirt and grime on his face, Mergen could see that he had rather gallant good looks. Mergen placed him around seventeen or eighteen—not much older than Hongjun. He watched Mergen with wary eyes.

Mergen sighed as he bent down to retrieve an envelope from the lunatic’s filthy, bloodstained clothes. Mottled with blood, the envelope contained a letter requesting support for Chengji District in Tianshui Commandery. The characters were blurred and barely legible; he could only make out the name of the sender—Commandant Huang An of the Chengji District Guard—and the fact that he had sent a scout named Lu Xu to seek reinforcements from Wutai District.

“Lu Xu?” Mergen asked aloud.

A trace of confusion flitted through the young man’s eyes. Mergen handed him a set of clean clothes, but Lu Xu merely stood there, buck naked, looking Mergen up and down. Mergen watched him for a spell before shaking out a cotton robe and helping him into it. Motioning for Lu Xu to follow, Mergen crossed the room to a small table, where a plate of boiled mutton had been set out, and invited him to eat.

Lu Xu slowly approached the food on the table. He reached out cautiously, observing Mergen’s reactions. When Mergen motioned for him to go ahead, he

grabbed a piece of meat and stuffed it into his mouth. Mergen ate only a few bites before stopping to study Lu Xu with a deep frown.

The lapels of Lu Xu's cotton bathrobe hung open, revealing black burn scars marring the fair skin of his chest and collarbones.

"Lu Xu," Mergen said.

Lu Xu looked up in bewilderment. "Ah?!"

"Lu Xu."

"Mm!"

"Lu Xu."

"Ah?"

Mergen began to laugh. He wanted to question this young man, but he was afraid of setting him off; perhaps it would be best to wait until after he finished eating. Lu Xu's hands had briefly stopped moving, but when Mergen fell silent, he bent his head over the plate and went back to stuffing his face.

After a moment of contemplation, Mergen took out a small knife and a piece of leather, into which he began to carve a circle of flowers. As Lu Xu watched him work, his chewing slowed.

"Deer," Lu Xu said.

Mergen's hands tremored slightly, his fingers clutching the leather. "Have you seen it before?" he asked tentatively. He opened his hand—in the center of his palm was a leather carving of a stag, antlers branching outward like a dense stand of sacred trees.

Lifting his gaze to meet Mergen's, Lu Xu nodded.

"Where?" Mergen barely recognized his own voice.

Lu Xu's face went confused again. Shaking his head, he hunched over and returned to his mutton. Mergen sagged back into his seat; for a moment, he had no idea what to say. "Where did you come from?" he mumbled absently. "The northwest… What did you see there?"

Rising to his feet, he stepped out of the bathhouse, hoping the cold wind would clear his mind.

For the city guard to have sent a scout to request support, some disaster must have befallen Liang Prefecture in the northwest. Presumably Lu Xu had encountered something on the journey that had terrified him out of his wits and sent him fleeing all the way here. But what did he see? Could it be the white deer Mergen was seeking?

Mergen stood in the courtyard, dressed only in a cotton robe and a pair of wooden clogs. After Lu Xu had eaten his fill, he scrubbed his greasy hands clean on his robe. He picked up the envelope Mergen had left on the table and padded quietly out of the bathhouse, slipping past Mergen and making his way, barefoot, toward the courtyard wall. The wintry gale had teeth, and as Mergen stood in the biting wind with his hands clasped behind his back and his brow furrowed in deep thought, he didn't hear Lu Xu pass by. Lu Xu sprinted toward a corner of the

courtyard and disappeared through the back door.

I need to send a letter to Chang'an and notify Li Jinglong at once, then have this boy lead me back the way he came. Whether it's beyond the Great Wall or to Yumen Pass in the northwest, I…

Mergen's thoughts screeched to a halt as he turned around to retrieve Lu Xu's letter, only to find the room empty.

"Where did he go?!" Mergen shouted furiously as he cast about. Spying footprints in the snow leading to the back door, he slid out of his wooden clogs and gave chase.

Chapter 46:
A Snowy Night at the Great Wall

THE SNOWFALL slowed as dawn arrived, gray and overcast.

Inside the relay station, Li Jinglong lay on his back, fast asleep with one arm wrapped around Hongjun's shoulders and his chest serving as Hongjun's pillow. Hongjun had plastered himself to Li Jinglong, as if strangely and innately drawn to the lamp inside his heart.

The wind howled outside the windows. Hongjun yawned, his breath catching as he opened his eyes and saw Li Jinglong's sleeping face. He had curled himself completely around Li Jinglong in his sleep and woke to find himself with one hand clutching the chief's waist, a leg shoved between Li Jinglong's, and his head buried against his shoulder, where he could hear the steady beating of his heart.

To make matters worse, on this bright and early morning, Hongjun had woken up hard. He could feel himself pressing against the crotch of his pants, stiff and slightly damp. He could also feel Li Jinglong's own hardness against his leg. The warm blankets, Li Jinglong's body heat, the gentle rise and fall of his chest under Hongjun's ear, the pleasant scent of his skin—all of it gave Hongjun an indescribable sense of security, as if he would never be alone again.

The thought deeply moved him, and he found himself suddenly overwhelmed with yearning.

Well, as long as he's still asleep… Might as well hug him a while longer. Hongjun liked this feeling a lot. It reminded him of how he felt after eating something delicious, like a flower was blossoming in his heart; or when he sunned himself on the rocks as the warm breeze drifted over him—like he was being gently embraced by the whole world, the feeling of companionship constant and unending.

Unfortunately, his slight movements woke Li Jinglong. Hongjun carefully unwound himself and turned over to lie on his own side of the bed. Li Jinglong's brows drew together as he stirred, but he smiled when he opened his eyes and saw Hongjun.

"How long have you been awake?" Li Jinglong asked as he kneaded his shoulder and stretched out his arm, which had gone numb from Hongjun lying on it.

"You've been smiling a lot lately," Hongjun observed.

Li Jinglong's smile faded as he seemed to realize something. He told Hongjun to get up quickly—it wouldn't do to lie around in bed all day.

The storm had yet to subside, but the snow was no longer blowing so hard. They finished breakfast but saw no passing merchant caravans. It seemed the weather would worsen the further northwest they went, making the roads increasingly treacherous.

Standing outside the relay station, Li Jinglong studied the sky with a deeply furrowed brow. Hongjun knew he was anxious to get moving. "The snow's not so bad anymore. Let's go."

Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. “Are you sure? It’s still windy.”

Hongjun assured him it was fine. After a moment’s hesitation, Li Jinglong decided they would continue on their way.

“You’ll have to be careful not to get turned around if you’re looking to get to Wuwei,” the relay station attendant said as he joined them outside. “In snow this deep, the official roads will be buried. There’ll be no saving you if you get lost in the wilderness.”

Li Jinglong agreed. The maps he’d brought from Chang’an were all two years old, and over the course of their journey, they’d taken several wrong turns because the roads had changed. Luckily they had managed to correct course whenever they’d gone astray, but with the snow covering the official roads and surrounding fields all in the same featureless white, and with no tracks from merchant caravans to follow, they were only too likely to end up lost.

“Head north,” the attendant advised. “There’s a section of the Great Wall built during the Han dynasty there; you can use it as cover from the wind. Follow it all the way to the garrison station beyond Wuwei. From there, ride south for twenty miles or so, and you’ll reach your destination.”

Li Jinglong thanked the attendant and rode off with Hongjun to search for the section of the Great Wall he had mentioned. It was a difficult ride with the road covered in snow, yet Hongjun couldn’t help but exclaim when he finally spied the Great Wall.

The towering fortification rose out of the vast snowscape, indifferent to the blizzard whipping past as it guarded the prosperous Divine Land. It stood against the horizon as if marking the edge of the world. This long and winding dragon soared over the barren plains and climbed through the mountains, rising high into the sky before diving back to earth—just as it had for over a millennium.

“Let’s go,” Li Jinglong said, reining his horse around.

“What’s beyond the wall?” Hongjun asked.

“A vaster world,” Li Jinglong answered.

“I’ve read Wang Changling’s poem before—‘*The moon hangs bright above the frontier pass, as in times of old…*’”[14]

“‘*The soldiers who march in far-flung lands—have yet to come home*,’” Li Jinglong sang out, picking up the next line with a smile as their horses galloped along the Great Wall amid wind and snow to the end of the world: “‘*If the Flying General who guarded the nation yet lived, past the Yin Mountains, never would foreign horses roam*.’ This is a poem about my ancestor,” he explained to Hongjun.

Hongjun didn’t know anything about Li Jinglong’s family, but given the Flying General Li Guang’s impressive title, he thought he must have been a very accomplished man.

“Are you cold?” Li Jinglong asked, slowing his horse to a walk.

After last night, Hongjun felt newly awkward in Li Jinglong’s presence and had thus taken the initiative to ride his own horse for once. Hongjun tried to wave him off, but Li Jinglong insisted. “Come over here if you’re cold. Gege will give

you a ride."

"I'm not that weak!" Hongjun protested.

The carp yao stirred and popped his head out from behind Hongjun. "We're not cold at all. What's wrong, Chief Li? This weather too much for you?"

The snowstorm had picked up again, howling more fiercely than the night before. The cold air stung Hongjun's lungs with each breath, and for a moment, he found himself struggling to speak. Li Jinglong motioned for him to cover his nose and mouth, then took the lead again to clear their path.

The Great Wall stretched thousands of miles into the distance, seemingly without end. Li Jinglong rode on with his nose and mouth covered, turning back from time to time to check that Hongjun was still following. It was strange: Hongjun could see the snowstorm whipping around them like a million stars crashing down from a collapsing sky, the wind so strong it seemed it would sweep up great handfuls of the land and fling them to the ends of the earth, yet he didn't shiver at all.

Li Jinglong reined his horse to a halt.

"What's wrong?!" Hongjun called out.

"Aren't you cold?!" Li Jinglong shouted back. "Let's turn back! I don't want you to freeze!"

"Honestly, I'm fine," Hongjun said. "What about you?"

Li Jinglong was wearing riding gloves, and his body was wrapped in a thick black cloak. He had always been robust, but even he was shivering now. "I'm okay. In that case…let's go a little further! We should reach the border garrison by nightfall!"

The pair forged ahead for another two hours, this time with Hongjun in the lead.

Suddenly Hongjun noticed Li Jinglong was falling further and further behind. "Chief, are you all right?" Hongjun called back.

Sitting astride his horse, Li Jinglong sneezed in response.

Did he catch a cold? After a brief pause, Hongjun wheeled his horse around. The wind battered them from all directions, making it nearly impossible to move.

"Let's find somewhere to take shelter for now!" Li Jinglong shouted.

Ancient barracks were built every three miles along the Han-era Great Wall, meant to house troops that had patrolled late into the night. They barged haphazardly into the first one they saw, Hongjun slamming the door behind them to shut out the frigid gale. Li Jinglong rubbed his hands together and blew into his palms, his lips tinged faintly blue.

The carp yao, freed from Hongjun's bag, rummaged through the room and dug up a porcelain pot for boiling water.

"Don't tell me you're sick," Hongjun said as Li Jinglong sneezed again.

Li Jinglong hastily assured him that he wasn't. "I'll be fine after a little rest. I didn't think it would be so cold…" He sneezed once more.

The heavy cloud cover had blotted out the sun; Hongjun had no idea how long they'd been traveling. He flicked his fingers, lighting the kindling in the barracks and building up the fire to boil some water to go with their dry rations. Li Jinglong fell asleep as he waited, leaning against a wooden chest.

"Hey," the carp yao called. "Come take a look—there's something wrong with this unlucky bastard."

Hongjun felt Li Jinglong's forehead: It was burning hot. "Oh no. Chief?"

Li Jinglong opened his eyes a crack. "What time is it? We should go; we've still got a lot of ground to cover." He tried to get up, but quickly slumped back down.

"You've caught a cold," Hongjun said. "Careful, or you'll damage your lungs. We can rest here for a while and leave after it's stopped snowing. Let me prepare you some medicine."

Li Jinglong was crestfallen—to think he would be the one who ended up sick! But he'd already embarrassed himself before Hongjun on countless occasions; what was one more? Reluctantly, he said, "I don't know what happened. Last year, when the Longwu Guard went to the Guanzhong Plain for training, I spent three days and nights without sleep, enduring pelting rain and blistering sun, but even then, I never got sick…"

Hongjun rifled through his pack in search of medicine. "Maybe it's because it's so cold?"

"That's right, that's right," the carp yao chimed in. "You're simply physically weaker than Hongjun; there's no shame in it. You know, my Hongjun…"

Hongjun gestured for the carp yao to stop poking Li Jinglong in his sore spot, lest he poke a hole straight through it. As he dug through his pockets to prepare a warming tonic of dried ginger, thorowax root, and other medicinal ingredients he kept on hand, Chong Ming's phoenix feather fell out. Hongjun made a sound of surprise as realization dawned. "Ah—so that's what it was."

The phoenix feather glowed softly in the frigid air. Hongjun had kept it in his robes the entire ride; no wonder he hadn't felt the cold.

Hongjun tucked the phoenix feather into Li Jinglong's lapels before slipping outside to collect more firewood to decoct the medicine. He yelped the moment he stepped out. "Yikes! It's freezing out here!"

"I told you it was cold," Li Jinglong said, his gloom lifting slightly. "Stay inside. I'll be fine; I just need to sweat it out."

Hongjun flapped a hand at him and walked out into the snow. He could see a frozen stream in the distance with a stand of trees growing on the opposite shore. The bitter wind picked up again, and Hongjun yowled wildly, as if his soul had fled his body. His jaw felt frozen open; he could barely close his mouth.

"It's so cold… It's so cold… I'm gonna die…" Hongjun nearly collapsed in the snow, the wind blasting him from every direction as he thought, *I can't die, I can't die, I have to go back and save the chief…*

Hongjun summoned his pentacolor sacred light, but while the light barrier could block the wind and snow, it couldn't keep out the chill. Using the spiritual technique only made him feel colder, so he hurriedly put it away and sliced through the trunk of a nearby tree with his throwing knives. He staggered back toward the barracks dragging a conifer the size of a grown man.

Hongjun stumbled through the door, shivering so violently it scared Li Jinglong half to death.

"Don't you get sick too!" Li Jinglong said anxiously.

"It's okay, I'm all right."

Hongjun lopped off a few branches with his throwing knife and shut the door behind him. He began to feed them to the fire, but it was a long while before he felt warm again. Setting the porcelain pot over the flame, Hongjun decocted a particularly strong batch of warming medicinal soup, which he administered to Li Jinglong before drinking a bowl himself. Then he wrapped Li Jinglong in both their cloaks to make him sweat.

By now the sky had grown dark, and the wind's howling was unabated; they had no choice but to stay the night. After drinking the medicine, Li Jinglong began to sweat. With the phoenix feather tucked into his clothes and both their fur cloaks wrapped tight around him, he was unlikely to be in any danger.

Zhao Zilong lay on his side in Li Jinglong's lap and fell asleep with open eyes. Carp became listless in winter, and he was no exception: Even his chatterbox mouth had slowed down.

Hongjun sat beside the fire with his legs outstretched, stirring the flames with a branch as his mind wandered back to Li Jinglong's words from last night.

What do I want? How do I plan to spend the rest of my life? Chong Ming had once said that no matter how high a bird might fly in the course of its life—over lofty mountain ranges under the star-studded night sky, or through fields of white clouds beneath the deep blue vault of heaven—sooner or later, it would alight somewhere to roost.

This was the destination at the end of the bird's lifelong journey; whether that destination was the vibrant world of sensual pleasures, a perilous peak ten thousand feet tall, a swallow's nest tucked beneath the eaves of a human house, or a lonely sandbar in the middle of a river, the bird would spend its life searching high and low for that place where it truly belonged.

Hongjun thought he now understood what Chong Ming meant. *Where do I belong?* He missed Yaojin Palace, for it was his home—but it wasn't necessarily the place where he would settle for life. Perhaps there would come a day when he realized he truly did belong at Yaojin Palace, but it wasn't today.

Yaojin Palace had once belonged to his birth father, Kong Xuan, as well as Chong Ming and Qing Xiong. Perhaps this feeling was why his father had come to the Divine Land to be with his mother. Had he found where he belonged?

After catching Lu Xu and before leaving Yulin, Mergen had led the young man to the city guard and entrusted them with a letter.

"Please send this to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review in Chang'an to be forwarded to Chief Li Jinglong of the Department of Demonic Exorcism," Mergen said.

On his way here, he had heard plenty of news out of the northwest from the northern merchants traveling to the Central Plains for the winter. Rumors of walking corpses in the border region had grown rampant, and while some claimed it was merely a group of marauding Uyghurs who had disguised themselves in order to loot and massacre entire cities, others declared that Yumen Pass was crawling with the undead. The stories became increasingly vivid and detailed as they spread.

The military dispatch Lu Xu carried was originally meant to be delivered to Geshu Han's garrison in Liang Prefecture, but the letter's contents had long since become illegible. It would be best to travel north and see what was going on for himself. Mergen had sent the smudged dispatch to Li Jinglong enclosed with a letter of his own, which detailed all the news he had heard in the north. He would leave the matter to his judgment.

"See?" Mergen turned to Lu Xu outside the gates of Yulin. "I've sorted everything out for you."

Lu Xu nodded repeatedly at the sight of the soldiers. The mission on which he had fixated obsessively since going mad was now complete. He looked up at Mergen.

"Take me to find that deer," Mergen said. "Do you remember where you saw it?"

Lu Xu hesitated, eyeing Mergen. Mergen patted himself on the chest. "I can beat the ghosts. I'll help you get revenge."

Apparently convinced, Lu Xu stopped trying to escape and agreed to lead the way north.

After donning his leather mask, Mergen pulled Lu Xu up on the horse behind him. He turned back and asked, "How old are you? How large is your family?"

Lu Xu said nothing, merely glancing around in the saddle. Mergen found this young man rather pitiful. If what he'd heard was to be believed, Lu Xu's comrades were almost certainly dead—and if the garrison to which he belonged had been wiped out, his family in whatever district they protected was likely gone too. The least Mergen could do was keep an eye out for him as they traveled.

Sighing softly, Hongjun glanced from the barracks' tiny window out into the frozen landscape beneath the Han-era Great Wall. The snow had stopped at some point, but it was still dark; he couldn't see a thing. He laid a hand on Li Jinglong's forehead; the chief still had a fever, but his face was no longer so frighteningly pale.

Hongjun watched him until he began to tire. He was settling in for the night when he heard a soft rustle followed by the horses' uneasy whinnies outside.

An animal trying to shelter from the cold? Hongjun grabbed a branch from the fire and got up to check, concerned it was a fox or a wolf that might spook their horses. If it wasn't a ferocious beast, it would do no harm to let the creature come in and warm up by the fire for the night, he thought.

The sky was heavy with dreary clouds when he pushed open the door and stepped outside. It was so dark he couldn't even see his own hands in front of him. Hongjun raised his makeshift torch and saw their anxious horses resting in a corner out of the wind.

Turning, he cast the torch's light into the darkness and spotted a trail of messy footprints a dozen feet away.

Someone's here?

There's someone here!

"Who's there?" Hongjun called.

From across the snowy field, he heard the snap of broken branches along the banks of the frozen stream. Hongjun stepped forward and raised the torch aloft as the wind whipped around him. An incessant rustling started up behind him, and the horses whickered nervously again. No other sounds broke the quiet of the night; it was unnervingly silent.

The cold was pervasive, curling like quicksilver around all it touched. Hongjun walked another few paces forward and hopped over the little stream. The torch's glow illuminated his wary face. Something was off.

As he peered through the forest, a cluster of dark shadows appeared on the trees at his back.

Hongjun was about to turn around when a black shadow crashed into him from behind. He rolled to break his fall and drew a throwing knife, releasing the blade the moment he completed his somersault.

The knife pierced the black shadow's chest, plunging into its body. But the shadow didn't seem to fear the throwing knife at all—with an eerie cry, it charged forward once again.

What the hell?! Hongjun was still reeling when another armored monster rushed at his back and more jumped down from the trees. As he swung the torch up to block their strikes, he lost his grip; the burning branch fell to the ground, instantly extinguished in the snow.

The pentacolor sacred light expanded with a deep thrum, blocking the blades that slashed at him from all directions. Through the dreamy luster of iridescent light, Hongjun finally made out the faces of his enemies.

It was a troop of soldiers dressed in strange armor, with cloudy, pupilless eyes. Lifting their blades, they swung down at Hongjun.

Chapter 47:
Han-Dynasty Corpse Soldiers

CORPSES?!

"Li Jinglong!" Hongjun cried in alarm.

He had never seen this kind of monster before. Stumbling backward, he surrounded himself with his light barrier as the armored soldiers grew in number. There were nearly twenty, all hacking wildly at him. With a shout, Hongjun recalled his throwing knife, bisecting a soldier blocking his path. The corpse's torso fell to the ground, cleaved from its legs, yet its arms continued to scrabble forward, crawling relentlessly toward Hongjun with a rattling groan.

Dark shadows appeared one after another, climbing over the top of the Great Wall and leaping down from above. Deep in the forest, the corpse soldiers' ranks swelled as they rushed toward Hongjun, who wielded the pentacolor sacred light as he looked for a way out. He slashed at the soldiers with his throwing knives, destroying their bodies, but he couldn't kill them completely.

Hongjun expanded his light barrier sharply, sending the horde of dead soldiers flying. An uncanny roar sounded behind him as yet another corpse launched itself at Hongjun's back, clinging to his body.

Hongjun couldn't help screaming, *"Get off!"*

He had never feared ordinary yaoguai, but the sudden appearance of these corpses was too unnerving. Their numbers increased without end, and most important of all*, he couldn't kill them!*

Hongjun grabbed the corpse and flung it over his shoulder, but more enemies took its place, rushing forward.

Just as Hongjun thought he would be buried under the swarming corpses, an arrow blazing with white light streaked from the base of the Great Wall fifty paces away, screaming over the stream to embed itself in the leading corpse's helmet with a resounding *thwack*. The dead soldier collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

"Run!" Li Jinglong bellowed.

Hongjun kicked aside the fallen soldier and sprinted for the base of the Great Wall. Li Jinglong had darted out of the barracks with his longbow in hand, listening to determine the positions of his targets in the dark. He grabbed another arrow, drew his bow, and loosed shot after shot. Imbued with the power of the heart lamp, the arrows arced like shooting stars across the night sky, whistling past Hongjun with smoke trailing from their fletching.

With each corpse soldier felled, the arrows illuminated Hongjun's face like fireworks as he dashed toward Li Jinglong. Li Jinglong grabbed his hand and pulled Hongjun behind him as more enemies jumped down from the Great Wall and charged them with weapons raised.

Clutching his throwing knives, Hongjun scanned their surroundings, at a loss for what to do. The soldiers roared hoarsely, dragging their weapons behind them as

they rushed forward in a relentless assault.

"We need to run!" Hongjun cried.

Li Jinglong took a step back, herding Hongjun behind him as the soldiers approached. He exchanged his bow for his sword—gathering all his strength, he lifted his blade with a shout. The powdery snow on the ground exploded as the light of the heart lamp erupted from his blade, forming a wave of brightness that swept out in a wide arc. The corpse soldiers screamed in terror, falling beneath the dazzling glare, their severed, helmeted heads rolling across the ground.

Planting his sword in the frozen dirt, Li Jinglong leaned on the pommel as pain lanced through his heart. Hongjun hurried to steady him as he gasped for breath. He could see Yuan Kun's sigil glowing faintly under Li Jinglong's robes, protecting his heart.

They heard rustling in the distance, fading away. Li Jinglong heaved a sigh of relief—it seemed the enemy had retreated. He exchanged a look with Hongjun.

"I heard you calling for me in my dream," Li Jinglong said. "I didn't expect it to be real when I opened my eyes… Are you all right?"

Turning to look at the fallen soldiers all around them, Hongjun mumbled, "These are all…corpses?!"

Deep in the mountains beyond Jiayu Pass, Mergen drew his bow, arrow trained on a distant patch of forest.

Lu Xu crouched beside him with a vacant look on his face. The two of them were lying in wait behind a clump of underbrush, Mergen on high alert as he carefully observed the flutter of the leaves. Lu Xu frowned with impatience and turned to leave.

"Shhh." Mergen motioned for Lu Xu to stay hidden. "Just a bit longer."

He released his shot—the nailhead arrow leapt from the string, and a moment later, the beast lurking behind a stand of trees thumped to the ground.

Lu Xu started in surprise.

Mergen dragged the bear carcass out of the bushes. His arrow had entered through the animal's right eye and penetrated its brain, killing it instantly. He laid the bear out, pressing his palms together and bowing to the creature before heaving it onto his shoulders and staggering his way down the mountain. "Let's go!"

Countless itinerant merchants gathered before Jiayu Pass. Mergen hadn't brought much in the way of travel expenses when he'd left Chang'an, and after outfitting both himself and Lu Xu with winter clothing, he was almost flat broke. They couldn't go on without money, so Mergen had settled on setting up a stall at Jiayu Pass's market to sell his kills.

Mergen laid the bear carcass out, then set one foot on the animal's body and stood with his arms crossed, gazing at passersby from behind his mask. Lu Xu sat cross-legged beside him, whittling away at a piece of wood with his dagger.

“I’ll treat you to something delicious for dinner,” Mergen told him. He studied the youth for a spell. Lu Xu had been quiet and docile the whole way here. It seemed he wouldn’t make trouble so long as survival wasn’t an issue. Unlike Hongjun, who insisted on sampling every new dish he encountered, Lu Xu wasn’t a big eater either. Yet after traveling with him for several days, Mergen had begun to understand the care Li Jinglong showed their youngest member.

Some people naturally made others want to look after them.

“Huh? This is—are you…?” A passing merchant had spotted Mergen, casually selling a whole bear at the market. Shocked, the merchant began shouting, “My savior! My hero!”

Instantly embarrassed, Mergen shushed the man. “Stop yelling, stop yelling!”

A number of people turned to look at Mergen. Noticing his mask, one of them exclaimed, “Hey, isn’t that Solobung?!”

Mergen inhaled sharply as Lu Xu looked up at him and repeated, “Solobung.”

“Don’t call me that,” Mergen said.

“The great hero!” someone else in the crowd exclaimed.

“Sir!” The merchant spoke quickly. “You once saved my life on the ancient Chabulagan Road. I’ve wished to repay you ever since! No one knew of your whereabouts beyond the Great Wall…”

“There’s no need to repay me,” Mergen said hurriedly. “Please step to the side, I need to sell this bear as quickly as possible so I can head north…”

The merchant obediently stepped aside, then crashed to his knees in the snow. He beckoned to the woman and child with him, “Come! Greet our savior!”

Cries of “Hero!” filled the air, drawing more and more curious eyes. Another of Mergen’s rescuees—this time a hunter—shouted, “Solobung! My savior!”

Mergen was speechless.

A din rose up in the market as everyone strained to get a look. Seeming to remember something, the merchant jumped up and pulled out a box containing ten gold taels. “Sir, if you don’t find it beneath you—”

Lu Xu watched in confusion as Mergen hastily declined while the merchant insisted, following the box with his eyes as it was shoved back and forth. The crowd swelled as Mergen continued to refuse the man’s money. “Don’t just stand and watch!” he cried in frustration. “Doesn’t anyone want to buy this bear? I’m doing business here!”

The carcass on the ground was a high-quality specimen and extremely valuable, but although everyone here was a trader in some capacity, no one had the money on hand to buy an entire bear. As Mergen watched the merchant try to drop to his knees again, inspiration struck. “I’ll take the money and give you the bear as a gift,” he said. “Lu Xu, let’s go.”

Snatching the box, he pulled Lu Xu away and took to his heels as if running for his life.

“Solobung,” Lu Xu said.

Mergen ushered Lu Xu up onto the horse first before mounting in front of him. With a snap of the reins, they bolted from the scene.

That afternoon, inside the room Mergen had booked them at a different town outside Jiayu Pass, Lu Xu spoke up from where he was whittling his little piece of wood. “Solobung. Hero.”

“Solobung means ‘morning star,’” Mergen explained as he scrubbed his leather hunting boots. “It’s a nickname some people gave me.”

“Morning Star,” Lu Xu repeated. “Hero.”

“There are too many unfortunate people in this world,” Mergen mumbled, half to himself. “My dad used to say I should look at those suffering people, and then look at myself…”

Lu Xu bowed his head over his wooden carving as Mergen continued, his tone self-mocking, “I wanted to be a great hero once. I put on a mask and went around saving people. Looking back now, it was incredibly stupid.” Seeing Lu Xu yawn and set his whittling down, he finished, “Go to sleep.”

Before leaving Yulin, Mergen had taken Lu Xu to a clothier. Lu Xu had stared at the white, slim-fitting combat robes worn by people north of the Great Wall for a long while. Mergen knew scouts beyond the wall always carried two sets of robes—one in black for night missions and one in white for traveling inconspicuously through snow. Guessing these might be the type of clothes Lu Xu was most accustomed to, Mergen went ahead and bought them.

Lu Xu had a trim, youthful figure, with muscles in all the right places. Dressed in white robes, with his dark brows, bright eyes, and deep-set features, he looked like he might be of mixed heritage. Mergen studied him for a while, then asked, “Your parents—are either of them Shiwei?”

There was no response—Lu Xu had already drifted off. Mergen patted him on the chest and settled down beside him. The wooden figurine Lu Xu had carved lay beside his pillow. Mergen picked it up: It was a miniature stag.

On the roads of Liang Prefecture, soldiers on horseback came and went as if preparing to face a great enemy.

Li Jinglong sneezed—he had yet to fully recover from his cold—and Hongjun handed him a handkerchief to wipe his nose. When they reached the prefectural capital, they had barely submitted the crown prince’s decree when the city guards, afraid to act on their own, ushered them into the general’s estate to wait.

Striding into the main hall, Li Jinglong tossed down an open sack containing a rusty suit of armor, which scattered across the ground.

“Please forgive our poor welcome, Chief Li,” the guards said as they brought Li Jinglong a bowl of warming ginger soup. “The hospitality of Liang Prefecture surely cannot compare to that of Chang’an.”

Li Jinglong quickly thanked them, accepting the bowl with both hands. Before entering the city, Li Jinglong had specifically reminded Hongjun that these men were the soldiers who defended their nation—they mustn't be rude.

A military official entered while Li Jinglong was speaking to the soldiers. This was Zhang Hao, an officer of the Hexi Patrol who had been appointed the Cloud Banner General. Like Li Jinglong, chief of the Department of Exorcism and Honor-Bearing General, he was of the lower-third rank.

After the two exchanged greetings, Zhang Hao removed his helmet and said with a smile, "Ay, it's an honor to meet you at last, Chief Li!"

Li Jinglong nodded, one hand over his reddened nose; he had been sneezing so much, it was starting to hurt.

Zhang Hao gestured for them both to take a seat. "General Geshu Han, the Duke of Liang, is busy at the moment, but he should be back later," he said. He was the picture of an army ruffian as he slung one leg over the other and grinned. "Why don't my brothers and I take you two out for some local fun?"

When Li Jinglong politely declined, Zhang Hao asked, "Where's your missus? Oh wait, you've a young man with you instead. No matter, a young man can be a missus as well. In these parts, we—"

Feeling unspeakably awkward, Hongjun interjected, "Hello, General Zhang. I'm Kong Hongjun of the Department of Exorcism."

Zhang Hao looked at him in surprise. "You're a member of the Department of Exorcism too? Can you fight? How come you don't have a sword or bow on you?"

Hongjun glanced at Li Jinglong. With a flick of his wrist, four throwing knives appeared in his hand. He twirled them around his fingers a few times. A single look was all Zhang Hao needed to recognize that Hongjun's knife-handling skills were superb. Sensing the boy could easily plunge one of these knives into his throat if he wished, Zhang Hao cleaned up his act. "My apologies—merely a joke," he said with a smile.

After both Li Jinglong and Hongjun assured him that they were unoffended, Zhang Hao turned curious eyes toward the armor lying on the ground.

"I've already notified the nearest border garrison of the situation and asked them to investigate," Li Jinglong said.

He and Hongjun had raced the rest of the way to Liang Prefecture. Since the corpses were too unwieldy to transport, Li Jinglong had asked the soldiers at the first border garrison they passed to go to the barracks where he and Hongjun stayed the night before and follow up on the case.

"This is…" Zhang Hao began. "Where did you get this armor? This stuff looks antique."

Starting at the beginning, Li Jinglong explained all that had transpired through his stuffy nose. Zhang Hao's eyebrows rose higher and higher as the tale went on. He regarded the two men before him like a pair of idiots. *Did that fever cook his brain?* he wondered.

Li Jinglong had known no one would believe them. He'd wanted to bring back one of the corpses despite the trouble, but all the undead soldiers he'd vanquished with the heart lamp had become ordinary cadavers. There was no point in showing these people a dead body.

"I should have caught a live one," Li Jinglong muttered.

"A living corpse?" The notion made Hongjun's scalp prickle. He had no fear of yaoguai, but the thought of a corpse crawling all over him made him feel distinctly ill. Even saying it felt wrong.

"How are things in the capital? It's been years since I've been back." Zhang Hao didn't ask any follow-up questions about the corpses but turned the topic immediately to the situation in Chang'an.

Knowing he hadn't been believed, Li Jinglong offered, "His Majesty is in excellent health." He paused briefly. "Have you gone to see the four border towns that were massacred?"

Zhang Hao smiled. "Sure have. We sent fresh troops over from our own garrison."

"Did you uncover any new evidence there?"

Zhang Hao shook his head. "No."

"Was it the Uyghurs?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. Let's wait and see what the duke thinks."

Regardless of what else Li Jinglong tried to ask, Zhang Hao diverted their conversation back to Chang'an. Li Jinglong pressed doggedly until Zhang Hao finally saw there was no way around it. Smiling pleasantly, he said, "Chief Li, we are both soldiers. Forgive me, but there are some things I simply cannot say."

Martial ability was highly valued in Great Tang; rising through the ranks and leading troops into battle was widely regarded as a badge of honor. Li Jinglong could only guess that there must be something related to this matter that Zhang Hao was reluctant to touch.

Zhang Hao continued, "Later, when you meet the duke, if I could trouble you to…"

"I understand," Li Jinglong interjected. "In that case, may I ask—"

Before Li Jinglong could voice his query, the duke himself returned. Geshu Han was a man of towering stature with a booming voice. "What's the court doing sending someone here again?!" he thundered from outside.

Everyone was on their feet at once. Hongjun watched as Geshu Han entered, flinching in surprise when the duke nearly crashed into the door. Zhang Hao hurried forward to help the red-faced old man into the seat of honor. The duke was thickly built and half a head taller than Li Jinglong. He had a fearsome aura, and when he sat down, the couch shuddered beneath his weight.

As Li Jinglong rushed to greet the old general, Hongjun observed, "You're drunk."

“Nonsense!” Geshu Han roared. “I’m not drunk! Not drunk at all! Bring me another ten catties of wine!”

A middle-aged civil official scurried in after him carrying a cloak, which he draped over the duke’s shoulders. Bowing to Li Jinglong, he introduced himself as Qin Liang, the prefect of Liang Prefecture.

When everyone was acquainted, Qin Liang said, “The general was just rewarding the troops for Lidong,[15] to celebrate the start of winter. He had a few drinks with the men.”

Li Jinglong nodded. Geshu Han leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes as a maidservant fetched him some hangover soup. Geshu Han took a few sips, exhaled slowly, then said, “Go on, then—what do you have to report from Chang’an? What’s your name? Who sent you?”

Geshu Han positively reeked of alcohol, but when a man reached such lofty heights of officialdom, even an imperial censor wouldn’t dare impeach him for drinking on the job. Li Jinglong steeled himself. “Your Grace, this lowly official is here on the orders of His Highness the crown prince to investigate the massacres in the four districts in the northwest.”

A deathly silence fell over the hall. Zhang Hao stared at Li Jinglong with the words *That’s it, we’re done for* all but scrawled across his face, while Qin Liang’s expression went helplessly awkward.

“What did you say?!” Geshu Han demanded, his eyes going wide. “What’s the meaning of this?”

Even Hongjun could sense his murderous wrath. *Is this one of those things we’re not supposed to talk about?* he wondered.

Geshu Han straightened in his seat, glaring at Li Jinglong as he spat out his words. “Go back and tell the crown prince this—Liang Prefecture is under my jurisdiction. Don’t go sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong on the strength of baseless rumors!”

Li Jinglong understood at once: Geshu Han didn’t want anyone from the imperial court meddling in this case. There was no way Li Heng didn’t know this. The prince had purposely kept this key piece of information from Li Jinglong before sending him out of Chang’an.

“It’s not a rumor, sir…”

“Get out!” Geshu Han shouted. “I don’t care who you are or who sent you—even if it’s His Majesty himself!”

Hongjun furrowed his brow. He didn’t mind getting yelled at, but watching Geshu Han berate Li Jinglong made him bristle with rage. He drew in a breath to snap back, but Li Jinglong motioned him to stillness before turning back to the duke with a smile.

Geshu Han drew a deep breath. “What are you smiling at?”

“Your Grace, there is something you don’t yet know.”

“Speak,” Geshu Han said. “I’ll allow you to say your piece today. It’s Li Jinglong, correct? In my fifty years in the military, you’ll be the first I’ve granted such an opportunity.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Hongjun whispered.

Li Jinglong waved him aside. He picked up a piece of the armor strewn over the ground and beckoned for Geshu Han to take a look. “Has Your Grace ever seen such armor before?”

Geshu Han stared in surprise. Fearing Li Jinglong would enrage Geshu Han even further, Qin Liang spoke first: “Chief Li, where did you get this?”

“We fought someone wearing it about forty miles from here, at the base of the Han-era Great Wall,” Li Jinglong said.

“That’s impossible,” Qin Liang said. “This armor dates back to the Han dynasty; look, it’s rusted through.”

Geshu Han studied Li Jinglong with narrowed eyes, unsure what this young man was after.

“I swear it’s the truth,” Li Jinglong said. “This armor indeed dates back to the Han dynasty—as did the man who was wearing it.”

“What?!” Geshu Han thought he must have misheard.

Qin Liang frowned, while Zhang Hao seemed to be holding back laughter.

“I said ‘the man,’ but perhaps I should say ‘the corpse,’” Li Jinglong continued. “Tens of thousands of fallen soldiers, risen from the dead—this is the army that climbed over the Great Wall, massacred the four border cities, and is presently roaming Liang Prefecture.”

A pin-drop silence settled over the hall.

“Is that all you have to say?” Geshu Han asked coldly.

“Your Grace, it is the truth,” Li Jinglong said.

Geshu Han looked as if he had heard a bad joke. “Li Jinglong! You traveled all this way from Chang’an to mock me with this ridiculous tale on the orders of the crown prince?!”

Helmet in hand, Li Jinglong thought for a moment. “How about this: During the battle last night, I used a special technique to defeat a large number of corpses at the base of the Great Wall. I reported the incident to the nearest border garrison. Surely the garrison soldiers have gone to check the battlefield by now.” As Geshu Han eyed him, Li Jinglong said breezily, “This lowly official is willing to stake his life on the matter. The moment the corpses are brought here, the truth will come to light.”

“Very well!” Geshu Han’s response was swift. “As you said, we shall stake your life on this matter. You’ve got guts, Li Jinglong!”

“This…” Qin Liang intervened. “Your Grace, Chief Li is His Highness’s—”

“Hold it!” Li Jinglong hastily objected. “Wait a moment! Your Grace! I was merely speaking off the cuff…”

Geshu Han's tone was frosty. "Frivolity has no place in the army. Everyone present heard you just now and can bear witness." He looked Li Jinglong up and down. "I now believe you did not come just to spin tall tales."

"What does that mean, 'stake your life'?" Hongjun asked.

After a beat of incredulous silence, Li Jinglong explained, "It means I'll let him chop off my head if I lied."

Hongjun exploded at once. "Absolutely not! Why would you let him chop off your head?"

"The guys in the Longwu Guard say stuff like that all the time!" Li Jinglong retorted. "It's just an expression! How was I supposed to know he'd take it seriously?!"

Hongjun turned to Geshu Han. "It doesn't count. What he said just now—it doesn't count."

Geshu Han stared at Hongjun like he had never seen anyone so stupid in his life.

The absurd scene was interrupted by a cry from outside. "Report—a scout from the border garrison by the Great Wall!"

Geshu Han's eyes widened. "Send them in!"

"Well?" Li Jinglong prompted as the scout entered.

"You're Chief Li Jinglong?" the scout asked, his face a mask of confusion. "We found no corpses among the trees along the banks of the stream you described."

Li Jinglong was speechless.

"What? How is that possible?!" Hongjun exclaimed.

"We looked exactly where you said, and we're certain—there's nothing there!" the scout responded.

"Guards!" Geshu Han barked. "Arrest Li Jinglong and—"

"Hongjun, *run*!" Li Jinglong shouted.

Before Hongjun could react, Li Jinglong grabbed him and fled the hall with a furious roar.

Chapter 48:
Once Upon a Time in Yardang

"INSOLENCE!" Geshu Han exploded in rage.

In all of Geshu Han's sixty-three years, never had anyone attempted to feed him such a pack of lies. Nor had anyone ever offered their life as a guarantee, only to renege on their oath the instant their words were proven false.

"Catch him!" Geshu Han roared. "Drag him to the execution grounds!"

Li Jinglong and Hongjun dashed out of the entrance hall of the general's estate, blindly darting into the rear courtyard.

The carp yao, who had been hibernating in Hongjun's bag, was startled awake by the sudden movement. "Hey! What are you guys doing?! Why are we fighting all of a sudden?! Where are we?"

"The oblivion pollen!" Hongjun remembered mid-crisis.

"This blanket is too tight!" The carp yao was sensitive to the cold, so Hongjun had swaddled him like an infant; he was wrapped so snugly he couldn't even wiggle a hand out.

"We don't have time for this!" Li Jinglong yelled.

Geshu Han appeared surrounded by a formation of guardsmen; there was no way the exorcists could reach him. At his summons, a large number of crossbowmen poured out from the general's estate, and the scene descended into mayhem. Li Jinglong's head was spinning, and his nose was still running. These bowmen were loading anti-cavalry bolts capable of boring through a horse. It would be no laughing matter if they were struck.

"Go!" Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun raised the pentacolor sacred light, shielding them from the rain of crossbow bolts. At least the soldiers had shown a measure of mercy and aimed at their feet.

Li Jinglong sprinted to the wall and crouched down. "Jump!"

Stepping lightly onto Li Jinglong's back, Hongjun launched himself up onto the high wall of the general's estate. Turning, he swept his hands in a circle, and the pentacolor sacred light twisted, scattering bolts in all directions and causing the soldiers to shout in alarm.

Zhang Hao skidded into the courtyard. "Li Jinglong! Stop! Let's talk this out!"

Seizing his chance, Li Jinglong scaled the wall, fleeing the general's estate with Hongjun half a step behind.

"What if we took the general captive…?" Hongjun suggested, breathing hard.

"Seriously?!"

"Well what were you thinking, staking your life?!"

“How was I supposed to know?!” Li Jinglong moaned. “Isn’t it normal to make oaths like that? I never expected him to take it literally!”

They caught sight of their pursuers galloping around the corner as they paused to catch their breath. “We’ll lose them in the crowd!” Li Jinglong shouted.

It was the start of winter in Liang Prefecture, and the market was bustling with activity. The pair of fugitives dashed out of a narrow alley toward the market stalls. Hongjun was about to slip into the mass of people when Li Jinglong grabbed his arm. “Wait!”

Li Jinglong glanced back: Their pursuers had slowed and lowered their bows, afraid of harming innocent bystanders. “Let’s go!” he said.

“Should we split up?”

“What would we split up for?!” Li Jinglong pushed Hongjun into the throng as the soldiers dismounted and began to search the crowd. But there were simply too many people; Li Jinglong and Hongjun quickly lost their pursuers in the crush.

A short while later, the two of them stood catching their breath in an alleyway; Li Jinglong was still sneezing. Hongjun stood guard by the entrance of the alley, glancing out into the main street. “Now what do we do?”

The carp yao still had one hand stuck in his swaddling, the other free and waving about. “I can’t reach the oblivion pollen. Hongjun, loosen this blanket.”

“Use it sparingly,” Li Jinglong said. “There’s no place to stock up if we run out.”

Hoofbeats thundered past, and Zhang Hao’s voice rang out. “Search all of the alleys!”

Hongjun watched in alarm as the patrolling soldiers drew closer and closer to their hiding spot. This narrow lane led to a dead end; to escape, they would have to hop the wall.

Without warning, a door in the alley swung open. “You two, please come with me,” a girl’s voice called from inside.

Li Jinglong whipped his head around to see a young Hu woman of mixed descent with deep-set features. As Hongjun hesitated, Li Jinglong made a snap decision and disappeared through the door.

The Hu woman led them through the rear courtyard of a family residence and out the front door. Unlike in Chang’an, where they kept to separate wards, in Liang Prefecture, the Hu people of the west and Han people of the Central Plains lived among each other. Scattered between the older Semu and Uyghur houses built many years ago were the newer Hu and Han homes; all in all, it made for a uniquely vibrant sight. Han houses were primarily composed of timber, roof tiles, and brick, while Hu dwellings favored white stone, rammed earth, and poplar wood. A complex network of alleyways ran between the houses; after a few turns, they could no longer hear the soldiers’ shouts.

The Hu woman guided them through another narrow alleyway with market stalls set up on either side. This was the poorest neighborhood in the prefectural capital. It was freezing out, but there were still plenty of people doing business here.

“Hey! Is your fish for sale?” a Uyghur man asked in the Han language, tapping Hongjun on the shoulder.

“I am not!” the carp yao fired back with righteous indignation.

The Uyghur man yelped at the sight of the talking fish and stumbled backward, falling to the ground.

“Don’t make trouble!” the Hu woman snapped impatiently.

The young woman was tough as nails; it seemed no one in the alleyway dared offend her. As they moved through the small market, she paused and crouched down to make some purchases. Li Jinglong and Hongjun watched in confusion, but neither asked any questions.

After crossing several more streets, they arrived at another house. “Come in and have some tea,” the young woman said as she pushed open the door.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun stepped into a quiet and secluded dwelling with a mule and a millstone in the front courtyard. The entrance hall was simply appointed, with antique suits of black Han-era armor displayed on either side of the room.

“Mom! Dad!” the girl called as she walked in. “I brought them home!”

Hongjun glanced around. Two sets of court robes—faded from repeated washings—hung on a line in the sun. An older Uyghur woman sat near them, mending a long skirt. She glanced up at the sound and hurriedly invited Li Jinglong and Hongjun further into the house as a man stepped out of the hall. He had changed out of his formal court robes and into a lightly worn, cotton-padded jacket, yet they nevertheless recognized the prefect, Qin Liang.

“Chief Li caused quite the commotion today,” he said with a smile.

While Hongjun was still gaping in shock, Li Jinglong had already grasped the situation. Bowing with cupped hands, he thanked Qin Liang for his assistance. Qin Liang assured him that it was nothing and invited them into the hall.

“It’s a rather long story,” Qin Liang said with an air of deep anxiety when they were settled. “The old general is blinded by his preconceived notions. If the soldiers of Liang Prefecture have offended you, please find it within your heart to forgive them, Chief Li.”

“You believe me?” Li Jinglong asked in surprise.

Qin Liang nodded, his face going grave. “Twelve years ago, I saw the monsters you described with my own eyes in Sha Prefecture. They are known as corpse ghosts.”

After the snow, the sky cleared to a cloudless blue. Mergen rode double with Lu Xu as his horse galloped through the wilderness. The Shiwei people were experts at navigating the terrain beyond the Great Wall. Mergen followed the leeward mountains and rivers, taking breaks to rest as they went. When the weather took a turn for the worse, he found small towns or mountain caves to keep warm, and when he could, he hunted and roasted his kills over a fire. At night, he even

found hot springs so he and Lu Xu could bathe and soak away the day's exertion. Traveling with him felt more like a scenic tour of the region.

"Where to next?" Mergen asked, reining his horse to a stop atop a mountain ridge.

Standing on the edge of the cliff, Lu Xu stared into the distance, looking a bit lost.

"Why don't you try looking over there?" Mergen suggested. Lu Xu turned his gaze to the snowcapped southwestern range of the Qilian Mountains and narrowed his eyes in thought.

Lu Xu rarely spoke, but in the short time they'd traveled together, Mergen had learned to discern the correct direction by reading his eyes. Although a willing guide, Lu Xu had wavered at the start of their journey, as if afraid he might once again encounter whatever it was that had so terrified him. As he and Mergen traveled deeper into the Hexi region, his fear had faded, replaced by a newfound faith in Mergen. His companion was not only physically powerful, he walked the desolate wilderness like it was his own home. He never lost his way, and no beast—no matter how ferocious—ever dared attack him.

Despite his initial uncertainty, after seeing Mergen shoot a bear and grapple a tiger barehanded, he had begun to admire him.

Mergen could tell from Lu Xu's expression that they were approaching their destination. Guiding his horse down the mountain path, he patted the saddle, signaling for Lu Xu to get on behind him. Lu Xu merely stared at him without moving.

"Let's go. Don't be afraid." Mergen removed his mask and looked intently at Lu Xu. "I'm right here."

After a moment of hesitation, Lu Xu got up on the horse. With a snap of the whip and a shout, Mergen urged his mount toward the foot of the Qilian Mountains at a gallop.

At sunset, beneath a deep blue sky strewn with white clouds, a dilapidated little village appeared in the distance. Mergen slowed his horse to a stop before the settlement, staring in shock. Behind him, Lu Xu let out a heartrending cry as he tumbled from the saddle and dashed into the village.

In the ensuing silence, it finally hit Mergen: After the military dispatch was safely delivered, Lu Xu's next destination was his home. The village looked as if it had been pillaged—frozen corpses littered the ground, with not a single living soul in sight.

This high in the mountains, whatever bloodstains remained from the slaughter had been covered up by fresh snow. Prayer flags snapped in the wind at the entrance of the village. All was still beneath the pale smudge of the early-rising moon in the sky, the silence broken only by Lu Xu's hysterical cries.

The house Lu Xu stumbled into had an ox skull nailed over the door in the Shiwei style. A Tibetan woman's long, peacock-green skirt was hung up outside, drifting in the wind. Mergen pushed open the door and saw Lu Xu sobbing with a dead woman in his arms, gadflies buzzing around him and throughout the house. Lu

Xu cried until his face was covered in snot and tears. Mergen pulled him to his feet and put his arms around him, holding him tight to his chest, but still, Lu Xu couldn't stop shaking.

"You guessed this had happened before we came, didn't you?" Mergen murmured. "I'm sorry."

Now he understood the frightened yet resolute look in Lu Xu's eyes as he led them here. The young man had been worried about his village—about his parents—yet he had already known what he would find.

What had happened here?

Mergen placed a hand over Lu Xu's eyes, then led him out of the house. He handed him a shovel and tasked him with digging a grave. "Don't cry. Don't cry."

Lu Xu wept as he dug. Mergen knew the best thing for grief was to keep busy; eventually, the pain would recede. Leaving him to his work, he stepped back inside the house to inspect the body of Lu Xu's mother.

She had died with a dagger in her left hand, her right clenched in a tight fist. When he gently pried open her fingers, he found a broken piece of iron armor tucked against her palm.

Mergen held the scrap of armor to his nose and sniffed it, puzzled. He strode back outside to check the bodies of the other villagers. Most had their eyes wide open in death, their chests riven by the wounds that had killed them. As Mergen picked his way through the corpses, he spotted the elderly, the very young, and women—there were no adult men among the dead.

"None of the bodies here are men!" Mergen said as he hurried out of the last house. "Your father might still be alive!"

Lu Xu set down the shovel with a look of surprise.

After a moment of thought, Mergen quickly found the highest ground in the village, lifted his head, and scented the air. In the last rays of the setting sun, he crouched and pressed a palm to the ground—hair sprouted over the exposed skin of his face, and with a bright flash of light and a ringing howl, he transformed into an enormous gray wolf.

Lu Xu stumbled back half a step in terror as the gray wolf leapt down and bent its head to sniff at something in the snow.

"I'll be back soon," the gray wolf said in Mergen's voice, which had gone low and hoarse. It turned back to look at Lu Xu. "Wait for me here, and be careful."

As the creature bounded off, Lu Xu made a noise of protest and ran after it.

The gray wolf had barely left the village when Lu Xu caught up. The wolf turned and shouted, "Go back!"

Lu Xu chased it doggedly through the snow. He was as swift as the wind, just fast enough to keep up with the gray wolf. After a few lengths, the wolf had no choice but to stop. "I'm going after the murderers!" it said, exasperated.

Lu Xu waved a dagger he had picked up somewhere in his left hand and the shovel in his right as he gestured toward the gray wolf. "Morning Star! Morning

Star!”

The gray wolf bared its sharp canines. “Go back to the village,” it said in a deep voice. “I’ll be back.”

Lu Xu stepped closer to the gray wolf, the picture of obstinacy. In the end, the gray wolf bent down to let Lu Xu climb on, grumbling, “Fine. Get on. You’re only the second person to ride on my back.”

The wolf straightened up, sniffed the air, and loped off once more. Lu Xu was afraid to pull on the gray wolf’s ears, so he instead plastered himself to its back and clung tightly to its neck.

The wind whistled past as the gray wolf ran through the sunset until they reached a barren plain. Here, the snow had begun to melt beneath the golden rays of the dying sun. The gray wolf raised its head and sniffed as if it had lost the scent. Then it drew a deep breath and threw its head back in a deafening howl that shook the heavens and reverberated through the mountains. The sound echoed in wave after wave, as if there was a pack of wolves hidden among the peaks responding to Mergen’s call.

Moments later, more than a thousand wolves appeared from all directions on the barren plain and padded silently toward the gray wolf. They crouched down and bowed their heads as they came to a stop before Mergen.

The gray wolf straightened up slightly; Lu Xu tightened his arms around its neck to avoid sliding off. He stared down at the pack of wolves assembled around them in bewilderment.

With a toss of its head, the gray wolf spat out the broken piece of armor it had been holding between its teeth; the metal fragment landed on a stretch of rock with a light *clink*. The leader of the local pack was the first to step forward to sniff it before dashing away. Only then did the remaining wolves surge forward like the tide, six at a time, to nose at the armor fragment and then run off in different directions. In moments, the pack had scattered across the plains beneath the Qilian Mountains.

"Pick it up," the gray wolf said. "You hold onto it."

Lu Xu tucked away the armor fragment. Then, with Lu Xu on its back, the gray wolf took off westward, where the fiery red sun was sinking beneath the horizon. Part of the pack regathered behind him, nearly two hundred wolves running majestically through the wilderness in Mergen's wake.

Lupine howls rose and fell in waves, echoing into the distance. The gray wolf leapt over a river, sprinted up a mountain cliff, and skidded down a snowy hill. As the sun set, the moon shone brighter and brighter as it spilled its silver light over the earth. The wolves assembled on a mountain ridge, howling time and again. The gray wolf sniffed the air, detecting an unmistakable odor.

It was the stench of death.

In Liang Prefecture, the wind picked up as the sky darkened. Qin Liang's wife stepped into the house to light the lamps as he told Li Jinglong and Hongjun his tale.

"That year, I was appointed the chief of military records in Sha Prefecture. I served under Jia Songwen, the youngest son of Jia-lao[16] and the commandant of the city guard. As his deputy, I accompanied him north for a field training exercise through a sandstorm."

Twelve years ago, when Qin Liang had yet to turn twenty-three, he'd led a contingent of troops on a training expedition with Commandant Jia that lasted over three months. They had originally planned for the company of nearly two hundred soldiers to pass through the Yardang wastes on their way to Mingsha District. Yet they were still a day's journey from Mingsha District when a sandstorm swept through six border cities overnight. They lost their way in Yardang and ended up wandering further and further from their target destination.

Smoke and dust rolled over the Gobi. They were trapped, and once they ran out of water, their horses collapsed one after another. Even if they killed their steeds, there was little blood to be had from them. Jia Songwen and Qin Liang dragged their weary bodies along as their soldiers carried their fallen comrades on stretchers, marching through the Gobi on foot.

After three days and three nights, they had lost any hope of survival. But just as Qin Liang was about to collapse from thirst and exhaustion, a tall man wearing Han-era armor and leading a company of soldiers—over a hundred strong—appeared before his eyes.

Hongjun gasped in shock. "The same ones we ran into beneath the Great Wall?"

Qin Liang shook his head. “I’m not sure. Some of the soldiers were wearing armor from the Han dynasty, but others were wearing armor of the Wei Kingdom or the Northern dynasties. Some wore helmets fashioned in the Semu style. They seemed like a ragtag army of different allegiances.”

Qin Liang had been drawing his last breath when the leader picked him up and, after a two-hour ride through Yardang, tossed him into a stream.

“At the time, I thought they were Göktürk raiders who had traveled beyond the pass, but they didn’t look the part,” he mused. “My brothers had already fainted from the heat, and I feared these soldiers would take me captive to force Yumen Pass’s surrender—but then their leader took off his helmet and face covering.”

Li Jinglong and Hongjun listened with rapt attention as Qin Liang lost himself in his memories. “He looked… It’s been twelve years, but I still remember his face. His eyes were white, and his skin a mottled gray. He was a corpse—a corpse from the Han dynasty.”

Hongjun exclaimed in surprise as Li Jinglong echoed, “A corpse from the Han dynasty? It’s been over eight hundred years—how was he still alive?”

Qin Liang shook his head. “I don’t know. But he told me they had a name: They call themselves ‘fallen corpse ghosts.’ His surname was Liu, and when he lived, he was a member of the Han royal family. Now he was the king of the corpse ghosts.”

A cold draft knifed into the room, and the lamplight flickered in answer. Hongjun felt a chill creep down his spine.

“His army wanders the territories beyond the Great Wall,” Qin Liang continued. “Sometimes, they appear on the Silk Road. Other times, they pass through Yardang and venture deep into the Hexi Corridor.”

“Why?” Li Jinglong asked.

“They enter Yumen Pass at least once a year to search for soldiers who sacrificed themselves heroically in the line of duty. These, they transform into corpse ghosts, thus strengthening the ranks of their ghost soldiers,” Qin Liang explained. “Their pilgrimage takes them all the way to Dunhuang; then they turn around and leave of their own volition.”

Hongjun was astonished. “They can’t be evil monsters if they saved you.”

“Indeed,” Qin Liang responded. “My guess is that there must be some sort of legend associated with this corpse-ghost king. Perhaps he helped me on a whim, but at the end of the day, he was my savior.”

Li Jinglong and Hongjun shared a glance, their confusion deepening.

Chapter 49:
Leader of the Pack

THE GRAY WOLF carried Lu Xu through the dark night. As they arrived at a small hill in the northern Qilian Mountains overlooking a sleeping village, they heard the thunder of hoofbeats approaching from the north, each step striking like a drumbeat against the ground.

Lu Xu's eyes widened; he trembled on the gray wolf's back. The wolf growled low in his throat before issuing a furious howl.

The wolves behind him shrank back one after another in fear as the hoofbeats drew closer. The gray wolf turned back to shoot them a furious glare before charging down the hill. The pack crouched low, hackles raised, but under the gray wolf's orders, they loped forward and joined in the assault.

A fearsome army of mounted corpses surged forward like the tide, swallowing the village in an instant. Alarm bells began to clang. Panicked cries and children's sobs filled the air as chaos descended.

There had to be over ten thousand corpses in the cavalry. Turning sharply, the gray wolf flung his passenger from his back. "Lu Xu! Take the villagers and find a place to hide!" he shouted, his wolf form growing to a towering size. "Hurry!"

Bathed in moonlight, the great wolf charged into the village from the south. The sound of his howls seemed to return the villagers to their senses; they abandoned their belongings as they fled for their lives. The gray wolf leapt from rooftop to rooftop, the houses collapsing with thunderous rumbles in his wake. He followed the streets until he plunged into the cavalry's formation with a snarl. Soldiers and horses went flying as the gray wolf trampled the riders, leaving a trail of broken bodies in his wake.

The soldiers of the undead army raised their lances and rushed at their attacker. Before he could be skewered, the gray wolf flipped into the air and transformed back into the masked Mergen. Like a gyrfalcon slicing through the air, he landed on the shaft of a lance, bow in his left hand and the seven nailhead arrows in his right.

The seven arrows shot from the string in a series of rapid thrums, dancing across the battlefield in all directions. Mergen shifted back into the gray wolf as he plummeted to earth, crashing his way into the center of the enemy's formation.

The seven nailhead arrows traversed the full length of the battlefield, glowing with spiritual power as they punched through the corpses' helmeted heads. But the enemy's numbers were overwhelming; even after being trampled, undead soldiers struggled to their feet to launch themselves at the gray wolf's hind legs.

The gray wolf turned and took a flying leap, transforming into Mergen once more. Suspended in midair, Mergen beckoned, and the seven nailhead arrows returned, sending a number of helmets flying in the process. As wave upon wave of corpse soldiers lunged at him, he rotated his wrists and recited an incantation. The seven nailhead arrows began to spin wildly—Mergen threw his hands out and cried,

“Go!”

The arrows shot off in all directions, churning up a maelstrom of spiritual power and blasting the undead army’s front line apart. But there were simply too many of them. Launching attack after furious attack, Mergen shouted, “What *are* you? Where did you come from?!”

The corpses lunged toward him without end, pinning Mergen down. More and more undead piled on top of him, burying him in a dense mountain of bodies until, with a ferocious howl, the gray wolf burst out once more, sending corpses flying. Arrows streaked through the air, and the gray wolf smashed through the undead ranks. Suddenly a shout cut through the din:

“Morning Star!”

The gray wolf turned to see Lu Xu, still holding his shovel, leading the wolf pack as they fought to resist the corpse soldiers’ incursion into the village. After a moment of stunned silence, Mergen shifted back into human form and retreated toward the village, where he climbed to higher ground. He watched Lu Xu tuck his dagger into his belt and take the shovel in both hands, running like the wind. As the enemy soldiers swarmed him, he struck back with his shovel, sending the corpses’ heads flying in a wide arc across the battlefield.

By now the villagers had fled into the wilderness surrounding their homes. Mergen lifted his fingers to his lips and whistled before shifting back into a gray wolf and charging into the fray once more.

He watched in awe as Lu Xu wielded his shovel with wicked efficiency, the wind whistling as he swung left, right, and forward, sliced to the side and slashed downward again. Sometimes, he threw in a feint and dashed a few steps out of range with a burst of wind, while at others, he dug his shovel into the groin of a corpse ghost, twisting his weapon…

“Let’s go!” Mergen shouted as he jumped down. “Leave them; come back!”

Lu Xu raced toward the gray wolf, only to leap clear over Mergen’s back to his other side. With a fierce cry, he lifted his weapon with both hands and swung the shovel’s blade down, crushing the undead swordsman about to stab the gray wolf into the ground.

The gray wolf turned, and Lu Xu sprang onto his back. The corpse soldiers had overwhelmed the village like a swarm of locusts, the settlement collapsing beneath the black tide with a deafening rumble. Coming to the top of a hill, the gray wolf glanced over his shoulder and saw the villagers staring back at him, trembling in fear, before shifting their gazes to the young scout sitting astride his back.

“Wolf god!” someone shouted.

“Morning Star!”

One after another, the villagers fell reverently to their knees.

“Follow the southern road along the Qilian Mountains until you reach a village,” the gray wolf said in a deep voice. “Take shelter and rest there first, then continue south and seek help from the nearest district garrison. Go now!”

After the villagers had evacuated, the gray wolf growled low in his throat. The wolf pack crouched down in response before dispersing as well.

On his back, Lu Xu was shaking as he clutched his shovel, his breaths coming in shallow gasps.

"Your martial skills aren't bad," the gray wolf said, bowing his head as he watched the corpses in the village down below. His eyes gleamed green, like a pair of gemstones embedded in the fabric of the night. The corpses seemed to be solely interested in the village; none of them had pursued its inhabitants as they escaped into the mountains. After overrunning the village, the undead army slowly trickled onto the flat plain like a colony of ants, departing in an awe-inspiring column.

"Shall we follow?" the gray wolf asked, tossing his head.

Lu Xu strapped his shovel to his back and leaned down to wrap his arms around the gray wolf's neck, holding on tight. The gray wolf leapt down into the snow, following the corpse soldiers as they turned northwest.

The temperature plummeted as night fell over the capital of Liang Prefecture. Each and every household shut their doors and lit charcoal stoves to keep warm.

In the Qin residence, Qin Liang turned to his wife. "In honor of our guests today, let's slaughter a chicken and have a few more dishes for dinner—and bring us some more wine."

Hongjun had opened his travel pack and was about to ask whether it would be possible to make the carp yao a few meatballs when Qin Liang's wife noticed the fish in his bag.

"Oh my, you brought food as well? How gracious!" she exclaimed with a smile. "This is perfect; we can fry up a—"

"Ah—he's not an ingredient," Hongjun hastily corrected.

"I'm not an ingredient," the carp yao confirmed. "I don't eat much, but if you could spare a little meat, I'd be much obliged. If there isn't any, a steamed bun or dumplings will do."

Madam Qin screamed and nearly fainted from fright. It took a hurried explanation from Li Jinglong before she reluctantly accepted the origins of the Department of Exorcism and the reality of a talking carp in her home.

As Qin Liang dispatched his wife to cook dinner, the Hu girl from before stepped back into the room. She cast the carp yao a curious look before setting the table.

"This is my daughter, Qin Xuan," Qin Liang said.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun both offered their greetings. Surprised, Hongjun asked, "Is your wife Uyghur?"

"You should call her 'the madam'," Li Jinglong interjected.

But Qin Liang beamed. "I met Qin Xuan's mother seventeen years ago at Yang Pass. We were married according to our Han customs."

Under Li Jinglong's polite questioning, Qin Liang told them more about himself: He originally hailed from nearby Longxi. In his youth, his family had arranged for him to work under the deputy military governor of Hexi, handling correspondence. Later, the deputy military governor had retired, and Qin Liang was transferred to Sha Prefecture. When Geshu Han was appointed the Duke of Liang, Qin Liang had been called to serve as prefect of Liang Prefecture due to his pristine record and upright character.

As prefect, Qin Liang nominally oversaw Liang Prefecture—but in practice, here on the northwestern border, where the earth was boundless and the sky was vast, Geshu Han's word was law. The old general had the final say on every matter, and both military and financial power were firmly in his grip. Qin Liang was thus relegated to drafting documents, supervising military farming ventures, running schools, and mediating military-civilian disputes. All in all, he didn't hold much power and lived an honest and uncorrupted life.

Madam Qin soon came in to set out their dinner. In honor of their guests, she had slaughtered a chicken. When Li Jinglong attempted to apologize for the imposition, Qin Xuan cut him short by offering him a chicken leg, which Li Jinglong in turn passed to Hongjun. Qin Xuan eyed the two of them, but said nothing.

Qin Liang cracked open a jar of wine and turned to Li Jinglong. "Although I believe in demons and deities, I've always considered yao to be something divorced from our own lives. Seeing you with a tame one now, though, I feel certain that the Department of Exorcism is quite capable."

Hongjun nearly spit out his mouthful of soup. *What does a fish have to do with the Department of Exorcism's capabilities?*

Li Jinglong lifted his cup. "We eat from our sovereign's coffers, so we are loyal to his cause—we're merely performing our duty." He toasted Qin Liang and drank his wine.

"What if we brought Zhao Zilong along tomorrow and showed him to Geshu Han?" Hongjun asked.

The carp yao was busy stuffing his mouth with meatballs, but at this, he jumped in fright. "And if he decides to lop off my head in place of the chief's, what then?"

Li Jinglong set down his cup. "Unless I miss my guess, the general's stubbornness stems not from his venerable age but from his position."

Silence fell over the room. Qin Liang sighed deeply. "Indeed. And that is why there is something I wish to ask of you, Chief Li."

Hongjun looked up, curious. Li Jinglong glanced at him. "Do you remember what the crown prince told us before we set out from Chang'an?"

Thinking back, Hongjun recalled that in addition to asking Li Jinglong to investigate the massacres, Li Heng had expressed his hope that the matter wouldn't affect Great Tang's relationship with the Uyghurs, sparking a war…*huh?!*

Now that he thought about it, Qin Liang's wife and daughter were both Uyghurs.

"It is my belief that the recent friction between our nation and the Uyghur Khaganate has been more or less instigated by Chancellor Yang," Qin Liang said to Li Jinglong. "It's common knowledge that General Geshu Han has always been at odds with Generals An Lushan and Shi Siming…"

"Dad," Qin Xuan cut in unhappily. Qin Liang waved a hand, dismissing her concern.

Li Jinglong frowned deeply. "Old General Geshu Han has to make nice with Chancellor Yang…"

"Of course," Qin Liang responded. "Given his position as the military governor of Hexi, Chancellor Yang surely intends to pull the general into his faction. Meanwhile, the Tibetans and the Uyghurs have been regularly sending envoys to his office here as well."

Li Jinglong hummed pensively, his brow furrowed in thought. "Chancellor Yang has won old General Geshu Han over, convincing him to ally with the Tibetans and turn against the Uyghurs. What a thorny situation."

"That's right," Qin Liang agreed. "This is because the crown prince is a good friend of Gelei Khagan, whom he met during his military campaigns on the borders. Gelei Khagan assisted your cousin General Feng when he defeated Greater Patola last year as well. Thanks to this connection, I thought perhaps we would enter a period of peace with the Uyghur Khaganate, but alas…"

Hongjun was confounded by their conversation. "I don't get it," he said. "Yang Guozhong has won over…old General Whatshisname, and he doesn't want him to get too friendly with the Uyghurs, so he's decided to blame them for the border city massacres?"

"Mm-hmm." Li Jinglong nodded. "Exactly so."

Hongjun frowned. "But why doesn't Yang Guozhong care about finding out who's really responsible for the massacres? Do you think he knows about the corpse ghosts?"

A chill ran down Li Jinglong's spine. The thought that Yang Guozhong was hiding such knowledge was too terrifying to consider.

"He's the Right Chancellor," Qin Liang said. "What does he care about the lives of soldiers and civilians on the border? To him, it doesn't matter whether it was the Göktürks, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, or an army of ghost soldiers that massacred the cities. He merely wants an excuse to submit a memorial to His Majesty calling for war against the Uyghur Khaganate."

"A great number of people in Liang Prefecture will suffer if this war comes to pass," Li Jinglong concluded.

"All the Uyghurs would be expelled," Qin Liang said with a sigh. "Chief Li…this is a task of utmost importance. General Geshu Han is set in his ways; he will be reluctant to believe you. Even if he does, he's bound to have certain reservations."

“He’s being too careless,” Li Jinglong said after a moment of thought. “The way I see it, the danger from the corpse ghosts far exceeds Yang Guozhong’s calculations. We don’t know what prompted these massacres, but if we don’t get to the bottom of it quickly, I’m afraid…”

Li Jinglong trailed off. He met Qin Liang’s eyes and said deliberately, “When disaster strikes, all of us, including General Geshu Han himself, will be dragged in. There will be no going back.”

In the dead of night, a massive army hewed through the plains at the heart of the Hexi Corridor at a forced march. Trailing behind them with Lu Xu on his back, the gray wolf began to pant.

“I can’t go much further,” the gray wolf said, his breathing labored. “I need to rest a while.”

Lu Xu reached out to touch the gray wolf’s back, his anxiety spiking when his hands came away wet. “Blood,” he said.

“Am I bleeding?” The gray wolf turned and began searching for a cave to shelter in. After sniffing about, he found his way into the mountains. Even without seeing him, he could sense Lu Xu’s concern. “Don’t worry,” the gray wolf said as he dug his claws into the snowpack covering the mountain slope. The snow gave way, revealing a cave hidden beneath. Lu Xu hopped down as the gray wolf crouched low and entered the cave, where he changed back into human form.

Mergen put a hand against the wall of the cave, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath.

A short time later, they had managed to light a crackling fire, illuminating the interior of the cave. Mergen eased off his upper robes, revealing the powerful muscles of his back. Years of archery drills had toned his back and shoulders to the pinnacle of masculine strength and beauty. Desperately thirsty, he swallowed several large mouthfuls of snow along with some of their dry provisions.

His back was littered with cuts, but because he had been in wolf form when he was injured, none were deep when he returned to his human shape.

Lu Xu chewed up some medicinal herbs, then spread the mash evenly onto Mergen’s back. He applied the rest to Mergen’s ribs.

“Get some sleep,” Mergen said. “We don’t have to hurry.”

Lu Xu yawned. The events of the day had dealt him both a mental and physical shock; he curled up in the cave and soon fell into an exhausted slumber. As the winter night grew colder, Lu Xu shivered even in his sleep. Mergen transformed back into the gray wolf and pulled Lu Xu close with one great paw, tucking him fast against his chest. Bodies curled toward the fire, the boy and the wolf slept, nestled together.

The cold wind howled outside. Qin Liang’s home had only a single guest room; Hongjun lay down on the bed while Li Jinglong sat at the table, drafting a letter by lamplight.

As a child, Li Jinglong had spent a great deal of time copying the famous statesman Lu Ji's calligraphy. His handwriting was so beautiful even Qiu Yongsi, a dedicated student of the art, considered his skills inferior. Hongjun snuck glance after glance at Li Jinglong's brushstrokes from beneath his blanket.

"Who are you writing to?" he asked.

"His Highness the crown prince," Li Jinglong responded. "Sleep if you're tired. Stop watching me."

Hongjun shivered. Living with Chong Ming, he'd never had to deal with harsh winters in the Taihang Mountains. "Does it always get this cold in the human realm?" he asked.

"Yes." Li Jinglong shot Hongjun a glance. "You just stay put and keep the bed warm for me."

Hongjun had wrapped himself tightly in the blankets, leaving only his head sticking out; he looked rather like a spring roll as he blinked curiously at Li Jinglong.

Halfway through his letter, Li Jinglong hesitated, his brush hovering over the paper. He feared that by reporting Qin Liang's frank words, he would create a rift between the crown prince and Geshu Han—but if he didn't report them, he would be guilty of deception.

"Stop writing and come to bed," Hongjun advised him. After so many days on the move, he was so sleepy he could hardly keep his eyes open. "You still haven't recovered from your cold."

Li Jinglong's brain felt like paste. After a moment of consideration, he tore up the letter, peeled off his outer robe, and climbed into bed. Beyond the window, the wind shrieked as if intent on tearing the roof off the building, but inside, the bed was warm.

"Why is there only ever one bed when we're traveling?" Hongjun wondered.

"Hey now, I haven't complained. You sick of me already?" Li Jinglong asked, giving him a look.

Hongjun of course protested that he wasn't. In truth, Li Jinglong was very warm, and the heart lamp in his chest was immensely comforting. "I was just wondering," Hongjun mumbled sleepily.

"Chang'an is just as cold this time of the year," Li Jinglong told him.

They chatted idly until Hongjun could no longer string words together. Compared to the abandoned barracks from the night before, Qin Liang's house was as luxurious as a palace. Hongjun murmured vaguely, and Li Jinglong reached out, offering his arm as a pillow. Hongjun scooted closer and fell asleep with his head on Li Jinglong's chest.

The night crawled by. After drifting through boundless darkness, Hongjun had a strange dream.

A man was burning. Roaring black flames consumed him as he moaned, "Help me… Help me…"

Hongjun opened his mouth but couldn't make a sound. Countless memories flooded his mind, throwing him into the past. He saw a warrior in golden armor holding a glowing sword, standing at the front gates of the Department of Exorcism before Hongjun's kneeling parents.

"He's the only child I have…"

In a flash, Hongjun seemed to become someone else. He was taller now, standing in a flowering courtyard watching a beautiful woman in a Han-style skirt walk beneath the eaves of a winding corridor. A spring breeze drifted past as she turned to look at him.

The moment their eyes met, black fire engulfed him. Hongjun backed away, out of his mind with fear.

"*Chief!*" Hongjun's eyes flew open as he bolted upright.

The wind was still howling, but the night had passed. The skies were overcast, and Li Jinglong was nowhere to be found. Sitting on the table were Hongjun's phoenix feather and a slip of paper.

Received word this morning that the corpse ghosts attacked Wushan Town in the night; I've left with Prefect Qin to investigate.

Hongjun tucked the phoenix feather into his robes, threw on another layer, and swept out like a gust of wind.

Chapter 50:
Dark Clouds Loom Heavy

"LI JINGLONG said not to let you follow him," Qin Xuan said. She sat in the courtyard, shelling a basket of green soybeans.

Hongjun frowned. "How can I not? Where did they go?" He looked around. "Where's Zhao Zilong?"

Spotting the carp yao in a basin, Hongjun grabbed him and bundled him up without bothering to dry him off. Startled, the carp yao demanded, "Where are we going *now*?"

Hurrying into the rear courtyard, Hongjun mounted his horse, only to look around, lost—he had no idea where to go.

Qin Xuan had slipped inside to change into a fur cloak; she strapped a bow and quiver to her back before stepping out again. "Wushan Town is south of here, at the foot of the Qilian Mountains. Everyone's heading there today—even the general's getting ready to go!"

"You…"

"My dad always rushes to the front lines with no regard for his life—I'm going with you," Qin Xuan said.

Hongjun didn't argue with her. Qin Xuan led the way as the pair hurtled together toward the prefectural capital's outskirts, riding double. The soldiers at the city gates had received the news in the middle of the night, but as Hongjun and Qin Xuan approached, they saw that Zhang Hao was still mustering the troops.

Incensed, Qin Xuan cried, "You haven't even left yet?!"

Hongjun hastily shushed her, but it was too late—in her fear for her father, Qin Xuan had completely forgotten they were supposed to be laying low. Zhang Hao's eyes widened as he spotted Hongjun astride the horse.

"That's him!" Zhang Hao cried. "Catch him, quick! Someone notify the general!"

A number of soldiers had also recognized Hongjun and hurried to close the gates. Realizing the situation was about to get complicated, Hongjun hollered, "Hold on tight! We're going through!"

Qin Xuan tightened her arms around Hongjun's waist as he gathered the reins in his left hand and merged his knives in his right, slashing out with his long saber. The massive doors of the gate split down the middle with an earsplitting *crack*, and Hongjun urged his horse through the opening, shooting out of the city like an arrow in flight.

"After them!" Geshu Han bellowed from the head of a massive contingent of armored soldiers. "They dare destroy the city gates?! Where is Li Jinglong?! Arrest them and throw them in the dungeons!"

Hongjun thus added destruction of government property to his list of crimes. He usually tried to avoid causing mayhem, lest he make more trouble for Li Jinglong—but given that his superior had already created this mess, what did he have to fear from Geshu Han?

"You'll never catch me!" Hongjun shouted back. "Turn back! And *you*! What are you doing, hopping around like this at your age?!"

Geshu Han was speechless. Hongjun had always been fearless; the old general was apoplectic as he watched him ride off. "After him! I want that boy caught, whatever it takes!"

Hongjun's horse was as strong and swift as a divine steed. Even carrying two riders, it easily outpaced the heavily armored cavalry. With a kick of its hooves, the horse took off to the south like a blast of wind and dwindled into the distance.

Li Jinglong and Qin Liang rode into the small town of Guoyuan with a company of nearly two hundred infantrymen just after noon. The town was located more than thirty miles from Wushan Town, yet it was already packed with refugees.

"What's the situation in Wushan?" Li Jinglong asked as he dismounted.

Last night, the towns of Wushan and Anshan had been attacked by the same forces that had massacred the four cities beyond the Great Wall, the refugees explained. Many began to wail and sob as they told him of their escape. After hearing their story, Li Jinglong breathed a sigh of relief: Thank the heavens. Maybe his head was safe after all!

"The men who attacked your town—what did they look like?" he asked anxiously.

"How should I know?" a gruff-looking man snapped. "It was dark! I couldn't see anything!"

Li Jinglong nearly spat blood.

"Uh…" Qin Liang began awkwardly. "Chief Li, why don't we set our personal difficulties aside for now and go take a look at Wushan Town?"

A jackdaw winged across the sky, its hoarse cry sending a shiver up their spines. Li Jinglong vaulted onto a nearby rooftop and cast his gaze southward.

Below, families of refugees swarmed Qin Liang and the soldiers, chattering about a wolf god that had appeared last night to rescue them. Many had constructed temporary altars to offer sacrifices to the wolf god of the mountains who had shown compassion to the common people.

Unable to make any sense of the tale, Qin Liang called to Li Jinglong, "Chief Li! Shall we take our leave?!"

A chill wind whipped over the rooftops. Li Jinglong stiffened and jumped down from his perch. "Retreat!" he shouted. "Everyone, retreat! All civilians, take shelter in the cellars!"

"What?!" Qin Liang blurted out.

“Take a whiff of the air,” Li Jinglong said. “My nose is stuffed, but there’s a stench on the wind.”

The southerly wind picked up, carrying the faint odor of rotting corpses. Qin Liang tensed. In a low voice, he asked, “Chief Li, are they coming our way?”

Rather than respond, Li Jinglong ordered the soldiers to set up a defensive perimeter. After years of training in the Longwu Guard, he was familiar with a wide array of defensive fortifications. But the soldiers Qin Liang had brought were the prefectural capital’s local militia, not the elite troops commanded by Geshu Han. These men’s greatest responsibilities were usually mediating civilian disputes and performing manual labor; they weren’t a true fighting force.

“Prepare braziers!” Li Jinglong shouted. “Search every household and collect all the oil!”

The soldiers glanced at each other until Qin Liang said decisively, “Follow Chief Li’s orders! Hurry!”

The soldiers in Guoyuan got to work, joined by a few brave civilians.

“How long will it take reinforcements to arrive?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Zhang Hao only began mustering the troops at dawn, so another four to six hours,” Qin Liang answered. “Chief Li, you’re certain the corpse ghosts are coming here?”

A murder of crows flew over with a discordant jangle of caws.

Li Jinglong wanted to say he was positive—the birds wheeling overhead were a sure sign of a large-scale military march disturbing the forest to the south—but considering his terrible track record of false alarms, perhaps it would be best not to jump to conclusions.

“I think so…” Li Jinglong said hesitantly. “It’s hard to say.”

Qin Liang stared, flabbergasted. “It’s hard to say?!”

The soldiers flanking him lowered their bows, incredulity all but written on their faces. They turned to him with baffled frowns—*You’re asking us to fortify the town when you’re not even sure the enemy’s coming?*

The wind was bitterly cold, and the town of Guoyuan didn’t have so much as a brick wall to protect it. The only barriers between them and the wilderness were some bundles of wooden stakes that had been lashed into a rough fence around the town to prevent the incursion of wolves. Within the fence, wooden crates had been stacked up as make-shift watchtowers, between which stood a set of large wooden doors that could be cranked open and closed with a wooden wheel.

“What if we evacuated the civilians to the prefectural capital?” Li Jinglong suggested.

“Chief Li,” Qin Liang said, solemn, “you are the only one here who has fought the corpse ghosts. Today, you were also the one who…”

Qin Liang stared at Li Jinglong as he trailed off. His meaning was obvious. When they had received the emergency military dispatch before dawn, it was Li Jinglong who had urged Qin Liang to dispatch troops to Wushan without delay. Qin

Liang had deployed troops without authorization, purely at Li Jinglong's behest.

Li Jinglong was painfully aware of this. He couldn't allow Qin Liang to take the blame—the decision was his. After a moment of hesitation, Li Jinglong said at last, "We'll leave half our men here to guard the town. The rest will escort the civilians to the capital! Now move!"

"Very well," Qin Liang said. "Today, we will follow General Li's orders."

Li Jinglong nodded and quickly climbed to the roof again, gazing out into the plains in the distance as the soldiers behind him began organizing the civilians for a general evacuation.

As an hour dripped by with no sign of their attackers, Li Jinglong descended into full-fledged panic. He felt he'd reached new depths of misfortune. If nothing happened to the town, then in addition to being cursed for a fool by the local townsfolk, he would be caught like a turtle in a jar and dragged off to the execution grounds the moment Geshu Han arrived.

My luck can't be that *bad*… Li Jinglong sucked in a deep breath, trying to reassure himself. *I'm carrying the heart lamp. Surely that means the heavens have entrusted me with an important mission. I can't be beheaded by Geshu Han just like that. But…the heart lamp doesn't belong to me in the first place. Perhaps I'm just lying to myself.*

"I seem to have made a terrible mistake," Li Jinglong confessed to Qin Liang.

"Chief Li, what do you mean?" Qin Liang demanded, breaking out in yet another wave of cold sweat.

"I didn't bring Hongjun. If old General Geshu Han arrives before the corpse-ghost army, I'll have no choice but to run for it."

"Please don't!" Qin Liang was horrified.

The heart lamp was only useful against monsters. There was no point in blasting the heart lamp at mortal soldiers: At most, it would blind them for a few seconds. And no matter how skilled he was at martial arts, faced with an army of thousands, he would simply be trampled to death. Had he known this would happen, he would have woken Hongjun up. If nothing else, Hongjun could at least have used his sacred light to save his own life.

"In that case, you'll have to pray that the corpse-ghost army arrives first," Qin Liang said.

"What's that over there?" a soldier cried.

The ground shivered beneath their feet as twilight dimmed to dusk. Startled, Li Jinglong hurriedly climbed back up where he could see.

"They're here!" Li Jinglong shouted. The enemy had arrived at last.

His relief was short-lived; the corpse-ghost army converged from all directions and swept northward in a black tide.

"How many are there?" Qin Liang asked in a trembling voice.

"A…a hundred thousand." Li Jinglong gave a rough estimate. "At minimum."

“How many soldiers do we have?” Qin Liang asked again.

“A hundred.”

A deathly silence fell over the town.

The corpse-ghost army surged across the plain like floodwater, trampling the forests on the south side of the town. The hooves of a hundred thousand warhorses struck the ground in a steady drumbeat, shaking the earth itself. Li Jinglong took an involuntary step back as he scanned his surroundings. The remaining soldiers were trembling with fear; even Qin Liang was white as a sheet as he asked, “What do we do?”

Watching the dense mass of riders charge toward Guoyuan like thunder over the plain, Li Jinglong no longer hesitated. He nocked an arrow and drew his bow, aiming for the lead riders drawing closer and closer.

“Heed my orders,” Li Jinglong said. “After I shoot, light the fires, dump the oil pans, and fall back!”

The soldiers were more than ready to retreat, their hands shaking so badly they could barely hold their torches. Li Jinglong drew a steadying breath, and light erupted from the arrow in his hand. If he missed this shot, his troops’ morale would collapse beneath the enemy assault; he summoned all of the heart lamp’s power. A beam of white light burst across the sky, painting a shimmering aurora over the plain.

“Whoa, he’s glowing,” the soldiers murmured.

Pain lanced through Li Jinglong’s heart—but in the next moment, the brand on his chest flared to life with a faint hum, releasing the divine kun’s spiritual power and protecting his heart meridian.

“What *is* this?!” Qin Liang was stunned.

Li Jinglong’s entire body glowed with dazzling light, the faint silhouette of a divine being manifesting just behind him. He peered into the distance, his eyes gleaming with liquid radiance as his vision sharpened and the figures at the front of the charge became clear.

A massive gray wolf carrying a young man on its back was hurtling through the snow, leading the corpse-ghost cavalry straight to the town’s gates. The gray coat of the wolf and its rider’s white clothes blended into the pale snow, making it difficult to track them in the gathering darkness.

Li Jinglong aimed directly at the giant wolf, but before he could release the shot, the animal opened its mouth and shouted, “I’m on your side—don’t shoot!”

He promptly lowered his bow and retracted the heart lamp’s light. “Mergen?”

The massive undead army continued its charge toward the town, slowing a hundred paces out to scatter and regather in a tight rectangular formation, lances held aloft. The gray wolf sprang into the air, clearing the wooden fence as the soldiers shouted in alarm.

“Chief?!” the gray wolf asked, incredulous. “What are you doing here? You need to run! Those monsters are coming to attack this town!”

The corpse-ghost army outside raised their lances with a deafening rasp of metal and stormed toward Guoyuan Town.

"I'll explain later!" Li Jinglong drew his bow once more. Light spilled across heaven and earth as a blinding streak of white leapt from the string and tore a hole through the enemy's formation like the sun melting through snow.

"Retreat!" Qin Liang shouted.

The soldiers threw their torches into the oil pans and kicked them over, unleashing a torrent of fire from above as the corpse-ghost riders crashed through the gates.

The wooden fence crumpled like pasted paper. The gray wolf leapt onto a rooftop with Lu Xu astride his back, howling as he swelled in size. Lu Xu buried his fingers in the gray wolf's fur. Even so, he nearly tumbled off as Mergen charged headlong into the enemy, sending corpse ghosts flying from their saddles before crushing them under his paws.

With the collapse of the wooden fence, the human soldiers scattered. Qin Liang hollered over the chaos, "Stay in formation! Retreat!"

Li Jinglong backed away as he took shot after shot, his arrows falling to earth like shooting stars, knocking the corpse ghosts from their horses—but there were simply too many. The undead soldiers crashed over the fence in wave after wave until they pressed so close Li Jinglong had no choice but to draw his blade. With a shout and a flip of his wrist, he launched himself into the crowd of corpse ghosts, the Sword of Wisdom aglow with white light.

"Chief! Use the heart lamp!" the gray wolf yelled.

"I am using it!" Li Jinglong yelled back. Then, inexplicably: "Capture one of them alive!"

"But they're all dead!"

"I know!"

Li Jinglong drove back the corpse ghosts with another swing of his sword. But there was no way for him to stand his ground with so many thousands of undead soldiers assailing them; Li Jinglong was forced to use the gray wolf as cover, attacking from the left while Lu Xu handled the enemies on the right. The human soldiers guarding the town had long since retreated.

"Just catch one alive!" Li Jinglong howled. "We can leave after we catch one alive!"

With a swipe of one massive paw, the gray wolf knocked away a swath of corpse ghosts. "I said they're all dead!" he snapped. "How am I supposed to catch one alive?!"

As Li Jinglong sputtered, Lu Xu dashed toward him, shovel in hand; with a powerful swing, he sent the skull of the corpse ghost lunging for Li Jinglong flying, narrowly missing Li Jinglong's own neck.

So fast! Li Jinglong thought. He shouted at Mergen, "Who's this guy?!"

"Where's Hongjun?!" Mergen shouted back.

“At home sleeping!” A slash of Li Jinglong’s sword cleared the cluster of corpse-ghost cavalrymen barreling toward the gray wolf from the left. Man and wolf continued shouting past each other as more and more corpse ghosts converged on their location.

Noting the gray wolf’s blood-streaked pelt and slowing movements, Lu Xu called out, “Hey!”

“We’ll leave soon!” the gray wolf responded.

Despite his injuries, the gray wolf unleashed his wild nature with an explosive howl that set Li Jinglong’s ears ringing. He crouched down and lunged, sweeping the enemy steeds clean off their feet.

“Take a prisoner! Hurry!” Li Jinglong bellowed.

“Which one?!” The gray wolf grabbed an enemy soldier at random and tossed it back toward Li Jinglong. Combined with its armor, the corpse ghost weighed over two hundred pounds and nearly knocked Li Jinglong to the ground. “Will this one work?!”

“It’s not moving! Get a livelier one!”

The gray wolf snapped up another amid the chaos. The struggling corpse ghost bit down on the gray wolf’s paw. Howling furiously, the wolf tore the undead soldier in two and flung it to the ground, where the upper half continued to crawl toward him.

Li Jinglong sheathed his sword. “Just take half! Let’s go!”

The gray wolf pinned half of the corpse with its cloak and crouched to let Li Jinglong and Lu Xu grab onto his flanks. Grasping the bundle containing the captured corpse ghost in one forepaw, he took off on three legs, retreating from the battlefield.

Behind him, the town of Guoyuan burned. The corpse ghosts writhed in the blaze, swarming in all directions even as their bodies caught fire. Yet the enemy had no intention of letting their quarry escape. After reorganizing their remaining troops outside Guoyuan, the undead army once again took off at a thunderous pace in pursuit of the gray wolf.

“Run!” Li Jinglong shouted. “Don’t look back!”

The gray wolf looked back. “Shouldn’t they stop chasing us once we’ve left the town?!” he demanded.

“Who told you that?!”

“That’s what they’ve always done!”

“Don’t know,” Lu Xu offered.

The corpse-ghost army split into two, trying to outflank the gray wolf.

“We can’t keep going north!” the gray wolf shouted. “We’ll lead them straight to the prefectural capital!”

Li Jinglong was about to tell the wolf to turn when he heard the hoofbeats of twenty thousand mounted men from up ahead, their approach shaking the earth like

the rumble of an avalanche.

"There's more of them?!" the gray wolf howled.

"Wait a second." Clinging to the gray wolf's fur as Mergen loped along, Li Jinglong caught sight of Hongjun charging toward them on horseback with Qin Liang's daughter behind him in the saddle and the city's cavalry at his heels.

"Hongjun!"

"Chief!" Hongjun called out as his horse closed the distance at a gallop. "Those are enemies behind me! They're here to arrest you, so be careful… Mergen? Is that you?!"

Twenty thousand hostile cavalrymen lay before him, with a hundred thousand corpse ghosts at his back—Li Jinglong nearly choked and blacked out. "Go west!" he bellowed.

The gray wolf and Hongjun's warhorse wheeled as one to dash westward. Li Jinglong launched himself from the wolf's back, lunging for the warhorse just as Hongjun jumped from his steed onto the gray wolf. Li Jinglong was nearly thrown from the horse as he clambered into the saddle, while Hongjun steadied himself on the wolf's back.

"What's going on?" Hongjun asked. "Huh? Who're you?"

Li Jinglong was speechless; how had they ended up switching places? Behind him, Qin Xuan demanded, "Where's my dad?!"

Li Jinglong was fit to be tied. "Hongjun!" he thundered.

Glancing over his shoulder, Hongjun was about to call out that he would jump back when he saw the corpse-ghost army plow headlong into Geshu Han's troops, which had just begun to slow. Caught off guard, Geshu Han's forces dissolved into mayhem.

Hongjun immediately shouted, "Mergen! Stop! I need to go help them!"

As the battlefield descended into pandemonium, Li Jinglong realized that the corpse ghosts had no interest in pursuing them at all. They had advanced north because Geshu Han had come.

The sounds of fighting drifted toward them from afar. Hongjun slid off Mergen's back and turned to look at him. "You're covered in blood; stay put!"

A cavalryman fled toward them, only to be shot through the heart by a corpse ghost. Hongjun caught the dead man's horse and swung up astride, tearing back toward the battlefield as Li Jinglong yelled after him, "Have you gone mad?!"

Hongjun's heart hammered in his chest. He was the one who had led these men to this field of slaughter—how could he possibly stand by and watch? Gripping his saber in his right hand and raising his shield of sacred light with his left, he charged into the heart of the battle.

"Dad!" Qin Xuan shouted.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Li Jinglong yelped as Qin Xuan grabbed the reins and urged Hongjun's horse back into the fray before he could so much as raise his bow.

Hongjun shoved his light shield outward, sending the corpse ghosts before him flying, but the battlefield was too chaotic; he didn't dare swing his saber for fear of injuring his own side.

"General!" Hongjun shouted, spotting Geshu Han in the melee. The old man had lost his helmet and was covered in blood; Hongjun hurried over to help him up.

Geshu Han was incensed. "What the hell *are* these things?!" he bellowed. Seizing Hongjun's saber, he shoved him aside and slashed wildly at the corpse ghosts.

"Hey! Give that back!" Hongjun cried. "Don't take my spiritual device!"

As countless corpses rushed at them from all directions, a beam of radiant light cut across the battlefield like Pangu splitting heaven and earth, accompanied by Li Jinglong's furious roar. He sprinted over to Hongjun and Geshu Han, clearing the area of corpse ghosts with a few swings of his bright sword.

A few paces away, Qin Xuan had reached her father. Qin Liang's head was a mess of blood, and he had been struck in the arm by an arrow.

"Fall back!" Li Jinglong shouted. "We've got the general! You aren't ready for this fight; there's no way you can win!"

Despite their terror, the cavalrymen had been prepared to sacrifice themselves for their commander. Now that Geshu Han was safe, they had no desire to fight on; the entire army did an about-face and prepared to beat a hasty retreat.

A strange and distant roar sounded from behind enemy lines.

As the low rumble spread from the blazing ruins of Guoyuan through the barren landscape, the corpse ghosts halted their attack and began to fall away, receding like the tide.

The gray wolf raised his head at the sound, while Li Jinglong turned his gaze toward the distant snowscape, where the enemy was withdrawing beyond the horizon, perhaps to reorganize their troops for a fresh round of attacks. The twenty thousand Western Liang cavalrymen didn't wait for Geshu Han's orders; they continued to fall back, fleeing the battlefield as swiftly as their steeds would carry them.

With half a corpse still held in one massive paw and Lu Xu on his back, the gray wolf loped alongside Hongjun's warhorse and exchanged stories with Li Jinglong of all that had transpired since they parted. Yet as they traversed the vast expanse of snow, the wolf began to fall behind.

"They destroyed three villages in a matter of days," the gray wolf said between harsh pants. "Thank goodness the heart lamp works on them."

Li Jinglong halted his horse and turned back to wait for him. "At least we know more than we did: The corpse-ghost army is a hundred thousand strong, and they have a leader…"

Hongjun sensed something was wrong. "Mergen?"

The gray wolf began to glow as he shrank smaller and smaller. Lu Xu leapt from his back, watching as he shifted back into a human—into Mergen—and

collapsed in a dead faint.

Blood soaked the snow beneath Mergen's body as Lu Xu let out a horrified scream.

Four hours later, Li Jinglong rushed into Geshu Han's estate, hauling Mergen in with an arm around his waist. The carp yao fetched Hongjun's medicinal pouch; Hongjun frantically looked for something to staunch Mergen's bleeding.

Geshu Han's chest worked as he stared at Li Jinglong, still in shock from the battle. Maidservants soaked washcloths in water and wiped the blood from the old general's face and grizzled hair as estate guards came and went, delivering an endless stream of military reports. "Li Jinglong, I won't cut off your head, so tell me: What the hell is going on?!" the general demanded. "And you, Kong Hongjun—you saved my life today. I will most certainly repay you."

Li Jinglong motioned for Hongjun to take Mergen to have his wounds treated. A few servants rushed forward to help carry Mergen out to the rear courtyard on a stretcher; Lu Xu glanced around and followed after him.

"It's a long story…" Li Jinglong's hands were dark with dried blood. Although he had the heart lamp to protect him, he had still suffered a number of smaller wounds. He collapsed into a chair, exhausted.

Zhang Hao and Qin Liang, both bearing their own injuries, took their seats and turned to Li Jinglong as he began to speak.

Chapter 51:
Black Armor and Lion Helm

IN A ROOM in the rear courtyard, Hongjun approached Mergen with a pair of scissors. Lu Xu gave a shout and threw his arms around Mergen to keep Hongjun from touching him.

"I need to clean his wounds before I bind them." Hongjun had already sensed that Lu Xu was different from other people. He patiently explained, "Look, this is medicine."

Lu Xu gave Hongjun a dubious look as Hongjun showed him the medicine that would stop Mergen's bleeding. When Lu Xu still hesitated, Hongjun handed him the pellet. "You feed it to him," he said. "It's for external injuries, and it protects the heart meridian. It'll speed his recovery."

"Hongjun," the carp yao piped up, "that's the second one you've given him—careful you don't overdose him."

Hongjun nodded. These medicinal pellets contained powdered phoenix white and seventy-two types of rare and exotic herbs. Phoenix white carried the power of true fire, which protected the heart meridian and promoted healing, but too much would do harm.

Frowning, Lu Xu sniffed the medicine, his eyes shaded with confusion. He looked a question back at Hongjun: *What kind of medicine is this?*

"It's his dad's shit," the carp yao proclaimed.

"*Zhao Zilong!* Can you not?!" Hongjun shouted.

"Am I wrong?" the carp yao asked. "Phoenix white is refined from phoenix droppings!"

Mergen moaned softly in pain. Lu Xu glanced at the carp yao, then shifted his gaze back to Hongjun. At last, he crushed the medicinal pellet and slowly tipped the contents into Mergen's mouth, then helped him wash it down with some water. Hongjun picked up the scissors and cut through Mergen's robes while the carp yao continued prattling away. "Back at Daming Palace, didn't the chief also eat your dad's…?"

Hongjun booted the carp yao out the door.

Seeing Lu Xu looking to him for instructions, Hongjun said, "Go fetch some water—are you Mergen's little brother?"

Hongjun remembered that Mergen had five younger brothers, but looking at Lu Xu's face, he couldn't see the resemblance. Lu Xu hummed noncommittally before hurrying off to fill the basin.

There was a groan from beside Hongjun; Mergen had begun to wake as the medicine took effect. "I saved him during my travels," he mumbled. "His name is Lu Xu. He's not much of a talker."

Hongjun stripped Mergen out of his pants so he was lying naked. Mergen closed his eyes and murmured, “Cold…”

When Lu Xu returned with the water, Mergen glanced over. “Hongjun can help me wash. Lu Xu, go get some rest.”

Lu Xu started in surprise but obeyed, setting down the basin with a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. He turned and exited the room, but remained just outside.

As Hongjun wiped him down, Mergen forced a smile. “Well, that was rather embarrassing.”

“You think this isn’t embarrassing for me?” Hongjun asked, torn between laughter and tears.

“We saw each other naked at Huaqing Pool,” Mergen said.

Hongjun ran his cloth over Mergen’s chest. The man’s body was a horrifying tapestry of cuts. Hongjun applied medicine to Mergen’s wounds, then threw his arms around his neck, nuzzling his cheek before covering him with a blanket.

Outside, in the main hall, Li Jinglong had related the whole story from the beginning. This time, Geshu Han had no choice but to believe him; after all, he had seen the enemy with his own eyes.

“Does the general require further proof?” Li Jinglong asked. “My good brother brought back half of one of the corpse ghosts. It’s sitting outside now. When you see it, you’ll know I speak the truth.”

“Bring it in,” Geshu Han ordered.

The soldiers cautiously dragged the cloth bundle into the hall. The corpse ghost was still struggling within its confines. As everyone drew their weapons, watching the wriggling bundle with utmost vigilance, Li Jinglong held out a hand—there was no need to fear. He instructed the soldiers to form a protective line before Geshu Han, then used the Sword of Wisdom to tear through the cloth.

Silence fell over the hall.

Damn it, Li Jinglong cursed. *We grabbed the wrong one*.

The gray wolf had indeed captured half the corpse ghost during the chaotic battle earlier—but in his hurry, rather than catching the upper half as intended, he had nabbed the lower half instead.

The corpse ghost before them had been ripped apart at the waist, its legs bent into an unsettling configuration. The sight was at once incredibly distressing and hopelessly absurd. Everyone’s skin crawled as they watched it spin in place.

Legs it is then—as long as it’s proof. Sword in hand, Li Jinglong gestured for Geshu Han to examine their catch. The general’s eyes were wide; he was a veteran of countless battles, yet even he found the sight frightful.

“Hurry up and kill it!” Qin Liang cried. “Chief Li!”

The soldiers in the hall looked on in horror as the legs twisted and writhed. The corpse ghost wheeled around the room along an erratic path, shouts of alarm following in its wake. Li Jinglong infused the power of the heart lamp into the Sword of Wisdom, and the blade began to glow. He raised his sword, then hesitated—he had no idea how to go about killing the thing.

"Li Jinglong!" Geshu Han bellowed. "Do it!"

After scanning at length for an opening, Li Jinglong settled on stabbing his sword into the corpse ghost's crotch.

The legs fell still as the creature finally died.

Li Jinglong pressed a hand to his temple. "There's no need to clear my name. I've been the subject of gossip all my life; I'm used to it. As for the defense of the city, please do as you see fit, General. When you decide to move out to fight these yao, merely let us know, and the Department of Exorcism will assist you."

The atmosphere in the hall had turned awkward. Li Jinglong didn't wait for a response. Tucking his sword up behind his back, he left to check on Mergen.

Hongjun and Lu Xu sat shoulder to shoulder in the corridor, each holding a large steaming bowl of white rice topped with vegetables and slices of meat. They were both famished after the activities of the evening. As they ate, Hongjun explained how he knew Mergen to Lu Xu, who still seemed to regard him with mistrust.

When Li Jinglong walked over, Lu Xu shot him a wary look.

"This is our chief," Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong pushed open the door and entered to see Mergen had already fallen asleep. Turning to Lu Xu, he said, "Young man, if I could trouble you to stay with him tonight."

"I can look after Mergen," Hongjun interjected. "Everyone else is exhausted."

"You just worry about yourself," Li Jinglong said. "Go on, off to bed with you."

Night deepened, but the general's estate remained brightly lit—no one would be getting much sleep tonight. Li Jinglong drafted another letter to the crown prince in Chang'an; this time, he did not hesitate, brush flying across the paper as if he was taking dictation from the gods. When he had finished relaying the latest military developments, he folded up the letter and stuffed it into an envelope.

The room Li Jinglong shared with Hongjun had two beds. Just as he had the night before, Hongjun wrapped himself in his blankets like an eggroll and called, "Stop writing. Go to bed."

Li Jinglong sealed the envelope with wax. He removed his outer robe and treated his own injuries—he was covered in bruises and had suffered two shallow knife wounds, but was otherwise unharmed. As he was about to extinguish the lamp, Hongjun asked, "You're not going to help the old general and the others?"

Li Jinglong paused. “What do you want me to do? One moment you tell me to sleep, and the next, you tell me to go help.”

“Sleep,” Hongjun said hastily. “I’m just worried the corpse ghosts will come back. If we ignore them, won’t they go massacre another village?”

“You and I can’t defeat them ourselves, and if we chase them around, I’ll die of exhaustion,” Li Jinglong responded. “Geshu Han has gathered his strategists and started laying out defenses. They’ve issued an evacuation order to everyone in Hexi and advised them to take refuge in the prefectural capital; they’ll probably be up all night discussing countermeasures. Now that the truth is out, we don’t need to worry. Rest while you can—chances are they’ll drag us up before dawn and put us to work.”

But Hongjun couldn’t stop thinking about that sea of corpse ghosts. As Li Jinglong lay down on his own bed, Hongjun said uneasily, “Chief…how many people died today?”

“Was this your first battle?” Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun hummed in affirmation. Even if the Hexi Army hadn’t been completely wiped out, the deaths likely still numbered in the thousands. How would they go about recovering and burying those killed in action? The fight had been bloody, with soldiers on both sides losing arms and legs as the armies clashed in a raging torrent. Even the memory of it made it hard for him to sleep.

“It’s okay. It was mine as well,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun sighed. The wind wailed outside as Li Jinglong pulled his blankets up, cursing, “Why is winter in the northwest so damn cold?”

“Come over here,” Hongjun said. “My bed’s already warm.”

Li Jinglong sat up and dragged his blanket over to Hongjun’s bed. With both blankets piled on top of them, the pair fell asleep together, warm at last.

Under cover of darkness, the corpse-ghost army soundlessly approached the capital of Liang Prefecture from all directions, their horses’ hoofbeats muffled. All was silent in the wilderness save for the bitter sobbing of the wind as their general led his horse to the top of a small hill on the city’s outskirts.

He was a towering man, his powerful chest and broad shoulders clad in a suit of black armor, and a black, lion-shaped helm obscuring his face. His muscular forearms were bare, and unlike his withered subordinates, his skin was a deep blue-gray, as if the once-hot blood in his veins had cooled and solidified. The pupils in his deep-set eyes were still visible, as they’d been before his death. The skin of his face was devoid of any decay, and his eyebrows, hair, and nails were likewise as they had been in life. He resembled a wax figure, and the only thing that proved he had no body heat were the snowflakes that landed on his skin and did not melt.

Standing atop the hill in the storm, he was like a gray boulder covered in snow, gazing down at the capital of Liang Prefecture in silence.

A woman’s melodic voice drifted through the dense snowfall. “Is it finally starting?”

“The fallen corpse ghosts have all arrived,” a man’s voice murmured languidly in response. “What do you think?”

The next morning, before the sky had fully brightened, Hongjun startled awake to the sound of alarm bells ringing throughout the city.

He reached out on instinct; Li Jinglong caught his hand. The two of them were curled up snugly in Hongjun’s bed. Li Jinglong seemed to have been awake for some time, his eyes open as he listened to the sounds of hurried footsteps outside. He pressed Hongjun’s hand to his own chest.

“Don’t worry,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun shook off the last dregs of sleep. “They’re here.”

“Let me go see what the situation is first…” As Li Jinglong propped himself up on his elbows, he gasped, his heart suddenly throbbing in pain.

Hongjun sat up and asked quietly, “Let me see?”

Aside from worrying about the civilians and soldiers last night, Hongjun had also been concerned for Li Jinglong’s heart lamp. They were both wearing only their snowy-white undergarments; Hongjun reached out and loosened Li Jinglong’s lapels to examine his chest where the divine kun had left his brand. The mark had faded significantly.

“The divine kun’s yao energy isn’t unlimited,” Hongjun said. “What he left won’t sustain the sigil much longer.”

“I’ll just take things a step at a time,” Li Jinglong responded, watching Hongjun examine the mark. “That’s all I can do.”

“Let me try?” Hongjun offered.

Surprise flickered across Li Jinglong’s face. Hongjun traced over the brand on Li Jinglong’s chest, his fingertips glowing faintly with spiritual power. “I see… so that’s what it is,” he murmured.

“What do you mean?” Li Jinglong tilted his head, his lips practically brushing Hongjun’s ear.

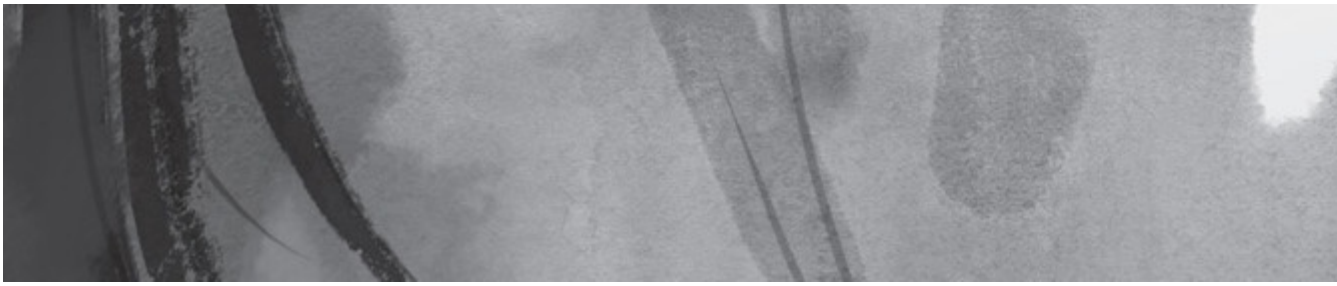
As their breaths intertwined, Hongjun’s ear turned scarlet. “Stop messing around,” he muttered. “This is a charm cast by the divine kun to protect your heart meridian. It can be imbued with spiritual energy, but the person who does it must be a yao… I mean, must have the power of the yao race.”

Hongjun glanced nervously at Li Jinglong, who simply said, “So in other words, you can strengthen this sigil.”

Hongjun nodded. “If you don’t mind…”

“Why would I mind?” Li Jinglong asked.

Relieved, Hongjun began to pour yao energy into the divine kun’s brand. A thought occurred to him as he worked. “By the way, no matter what Zhao Zilong says about my medicines, you mustn’t believe him.”



Li Jinglong had no idea what he was talking about.

"There." Hongjun stroked his fingers over Li Jinglong's chest as he finished, and the coiled sigil once again appeared boldly inscribed above his heart meridian.

"It's kind of ugly." Hongjun frowned. "Let me see if I can change the shape…" He reached out as he spoke, thinking to use his yao energy to adjust the bruise-like brand.

Li Jinglong was incredulous. "Who's going to see it aside from you? Let's go!"

A short while later, Li Jinglong strode through the wind and snow to the city wall and bounded up the steps of a watchtower.

Geshu Han, Zhang Hao, Qin Liang, and a host of Hexi Army soldiers had already arrived. They gazed into the distance. The expanse of plain beyond the walls was crawling with corpse ghosts, surrounding the city on all sides.

"So many?" Li Jinglong mumbled.

Geshu Han took a deep breath. "I'd like to see how these monsters intend to capture this impregnable city! Zhang Hao, dispatch the carrier pigeons! I don't care how you do it, but you have three days to assemble all the troops in the Hexi region. We'll launch a pincer attack against these abominations!"

Li Jinglong's expression shifted, but before he could object, Qin Liang shot him a look. Geshu Han glanced at Li Jinglong. "You, come with me. There is something I need to ask you."

Winter had settled over the city, and the pines surrounding Geshu Han's estate were laden with snow. Branches snapped under the extra burden, their brittle cracks filling the air amid the soft rustle of falling snowflakes.

Mergen had fallen asleep after taking his medicine. His wounds had begun to scab, but he was running a low fever. Hongjun roused him to feed him some congee before allowing him to drift off again. *He must be exhausted*, Hongjun thought.

He carried the bowl back out and sat in the corridor with Lu Xu to tuck into their meal. Watching Lu Xu stuffing handfuls of snow into his mouth as he ate, Hongjun hastily offered him some water.

"Oh? Isn't this the idiot of the snowy mountains?" an estate guard commented upon noticing Lu Xu.

Hongjun glanced at Lu Xu, whose expression had immediately turned wary.

Seeing the pair of delicate youths watching him silently like a couple of dogs, the guard stepped forward. "Hey idiot, I'm your father. Come on, say 'Daddy.'"

Lu Xu stared at the guard as tears suddenly streamed down his face.

In the main hall, Geshu Han coughed incessantly as Li Jinglong cracked open the bestiary Hongjun had given him.

“These monsters are called ‘corpse ghosts,’” he explained to his rapt audience. “They were created from soldiers of previous dynasties who were killed in action; thus, they’re also known as ‘fallen corpse ghosts.’”

“This bestiary doesn’t contain such a detailed description—how do you know their origins?” Geshu Han asked.

Li Jinglong shot Qin Liang a look, but Qin Liang merely turned aside and coughed a few times, apparently preferring not to share his personal experience. Li Jinglong said evenly, “There was a case file on them in the Department of Exorcism.”

“Did it say how to defeat them?” Geshu Han demanded.

“It did not,” Li Jinglong said grimly. “But the fallen corpse ghosts were clearly following some sort of command when they retreated yesterday. I think they must have a leader—if we can find him, perhaps we can force them to withdraw.”

Their discussion was interrupted by a great commotion and Hongjun’s shouts from the rear courtyard. Startled, Li Jinglong hurried out. Geshu Han frowned deeply as everyone else rose and followed him, puzzled as to what was going on.

In the rear courtyard, Hongjun was kicking the guard in the corridor with such force the man nearly threw up blood.

“Bullying him by making him call you ‘Daddy’?” Hongjun demanded. “I should beat you bloody!”

“Stop!” Li Jinglong cried. “Didn’t you say you don’t attack ordinary humans?”

A few of the injured guard’s peers rushed forward to help him up as Geshu Han demanded angrily, “Who started it?!”

Li Jinglong guessed what had happened at a glance: The guard had harassed Lu Xu, and Hongjun felt he had to teach the man a lesson. “It’s just a small disagreement, General,” he interjected hastily. “Let’s let them talk it out.”

Geshu Han pointed at Hongjun and coughed a few times, but no words came out.

Hongjun’s expression shifted. In a low voice, he asked “Are you all right?”

The moment stretched, but still, Geshu Han couldn’t seem to speak. Lu Xu, tucked behind Hongjun, regarded the old general with curious eyes. “He’s dying,” he pronounced.

His words were like a hammer striking everyone in the ribs as they watched Geshu Han keel over backward, blood dripping from his nose and mouth.

“General!”

“Your Grace!”

Panicked shouts filled the air as everyone rushed to catch Geshu Han.

Chapter 52:
Corpse Poison

EVERYONE BURST into wails of distress. Geshu Han's wife and all the maidservants ran to him, shoving Li Jinglong, Hongjun, and Lu Xu aside. Hongjun frowned as he tried to peer around the crowd.

"Fetch the doctor—"

"Someone, help! Something's wrong with the madam!"

"Go check on the madam," Li Jinglong told Hongjun.

Geshu Han was over sixty years old. Despite the general's gruff image, the old married couple loved each other deeply, and the only one he listened to was his wife. With a vast army bearing down on the city and Geshu Han taken ill, they were now dealing with threats both inside and out.

"Keep this quiet," Li Jinglong ordered the captain of the guard. "We can't let a single word of this get out. Tell the soldiers the general is meeting with his advisors to discuss countermeasures—go!"

The maidservants helped Geshu Han's wife to her room, and Hongjun followed to check her pulse. "Her condition isn't serious," he said. "She's just suffered a shock; all she needs is a calming draught."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"There are enemies outside, aren't there?" the madam asked. "Where is the general? Shouldn't you go and check on him?"

"The general's sure to be fine as well," Hongjun answered. "He probably caught a cold in the snow yesterday. Between that and all the worries plaguing him, he fainted. Please don't worry."

Only after hearing this did the madam relax. Grasping Hongjun's hand, she said, "I heard about you from my husband. You're all good children."

Hongjun held her hand as she talked. Li Jinglong didn't come to hustle him along, so he stayed and chatted for a while. He learned that Geshu Han's wife was once a young noblewoman from an affluent family. She was only fourteen the first time she saw Geshu Han in armor and fell instantly in love with his heroic appearance. She'd been with him ever since.

Geshu Han had experienced many turns of fortune over the course of his life, but his wife had always been by his side. She never took issue with his constant military campaigns. When he was away fighting on the battlefield, she stayed in the city, waiting patiently for his return. Geshu Han was of Göktürk descent. His foreign blood had made promotion difficult, yet she never spoke a word of complaint. Once, over twenty years ago, when the Feng District Garrison was on the verge of mutiny after a delay in military compensation, it was she who smoothed things over by selling her dowry to pay the soldiers and traveling to Chang'an to make peace with the imperial court herself.

She and Geshu Han had two sons and a daughter. Their elder son was in Luoyang, their younger was stationed at a garrison in the south, and their daughter had married into a family in Ji Prefecture to the east. Geshu Han had never taken a concubine and always put his wife first. No matter how angry he became, after a few soft words from his wife, he managed to restrain himself.

"This isn't nearly as bad as the time my husband defeated the Göktürks," the madam said. "We were besieged for three months straight. Toward the end, there was no more food in the city. My husband saved his military rations for me—but how would he have the strength to fight if he didn't eat? Don't you agree?"

Hongjun squeezed her hand. "Everything will be okay this time too. Don't worry."

The madam hummed in placid agreement; she had no idea the army standing outside the city at this moment was composed of undead monsters. Making the most of her audience, she began detailing all the various wounds Geshu Han had suffered and the various battles he had fought.

Hongjun had disliked Geshu Han at first—the man had a terrible temper and treated Li Jinglong so harshly—but listening to her speak, he couldn't help but respect the old man. Greater than his respect for Geshu Han's military achievements was his respect for the man's unwavering devotion to his wife.

"How many years have you been together?" Hongjun asked.

The madam's mood seemed to lift as she considered it. She responded with a sweet smile, "It's been forty-two years."

She'd married him at the age of fourteen, when Geshu Han was in his early twenties. Now, the madam was fifty-six. Hongjun couldn't help but marvel. Forty years was nearly a lifetime. Would he be able to live such a life—to have someone to rely on and accompany him through his youth and into old age?

"Do you love him?" Hongjun couldn't resist asking.

"I was very young when we first met," the old woman said with a laugh. "I don't remember how old I was at the time, but he was around your age. I called him *Gege*… Only later did I learn he was Göktürk, and that his surname was Geshu."

Hongjun laughed as well. For some reason, he wanted to listen to the madam tell more of their love story. *It sounds so beautiful*, he thought. *When will I have a story like this of my own?*

The madam prattled on until she drifted off to sleep. Hongjun carefully withdrew his hand and motioned for the maidservants not to disturb her before stepping quietly from the room.

To his surprise, Li Jinglong was waiting for him in the corridor outside. The two of them shared a look. Li Jinglong seemed a bit distracted; evidently, he had heard the madam's tale as well.

"It must have been difficult for them," Li Jinglong said, shifting his gaze to the snow drifting through the courtyard.

Hongjun hummed in agreement. "But it's a beautiful story."

After listening to the madam's tale, he remained somewhat dazed. He very much longed to experience such feelings for himself. Li Jinglong smiled as he studied him, then sighed. "You can savor their romance later. We've got a new problem—come take a look."

Alarmed, Hongjun followed Li Jinglong down the corridor and into Mergen's room.

Lu Xu was sitting at Mergen's bedside with his head resting on his arms and Mergen's pinkie held tight in one hand. Hongjun's heart sank the instant he saw Mergen's complexion. *His condition wasn't this serious yesterday—what happened?*

Seeing that Hongjun had come, Lu Xu immediately rose and pointed at Mergen. The youth had clearly been worrying for a while, but had no idea where to find him. Hongjun laid a hand on Mergen's forehead. "Mergen?"

"Cold…" Mergen mumbled.

Mergen had only eaten a little congee the night before, and his latest meal was still sitting on the table, barely touched. By all appearances, it was Lu Xu who had been feeding him. Mergen was still naked, his shoulders and arms exposed above his blanket. His external injuries had already completely healed.

"Try another one of your medicinal pellets?" Li Jinglong suggested.

"He's already had two," Hongjun said. "I can't give him anymore. If he takes too many, his body will burn up."

Semiconscious, Mergen didn't seem to register their presence as he complained again and again of the cold.

"This doesn't seem like a common illness," Li Jinglong said. "If anything, it's like he's been bitten by a venomous snake. He got clawed by the corpse ghosts—could the cuts have been contaminated?"

"There's no sign of infection in any of his wounds." Hongjun frowned. "I don't think that's it. What about…" Recalling that there had been more than one casualty yesterday, he asked urgently, "Chief, what about you? How are your wounds?"

Loosening his lapels, Li Jinglong shrugged off his robes and turned his back to Hongjun, allowing him to check his injuries. There were some obvious gashes from a blade on the muscles of his back and a jagged arrow wound on his arm, but the cuts were all healing cleanly.

"There's something else you need to see," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun helped Mergen into his undergarments as Lu Xu watched with worried eyes. "I'll fetch him some medicine," Hongjun assured him, his heart tangled with anxiety.

Lu Xu refused to be left behind, so Li Jinglong led both of them out of the estate on horseback, hurrying down the prefectural capital's central avenue. The army of corpse ghosts outside the city had yet to make any moves, but rumors were flying through the streets, shrouding the city in a strange and terrifying atmosphere.

Hongjun thought they were visiting the apothecary, but Li Jinglong took them down a small alley and into a residential home—the Qin Estate, which they had visited before. Qin Liang was lying in bed, his daughter, Qin Xuan, and his wife sitting by his side.

Hongjun started in shock.

"Hurry, come take a look at him," said Qin Xuan anxiously. She had sent word to the general's estate earlier, and now Li Jinglong had finally come.

"It's the same," Hongjun mumbled.

"What's the same?" Qin Xuan asked.

Hongjun checked Qin Liang's injuries. They had been treated with wound sealant and seemed well on their way to healing, but Qin Liang's complexion was sickly pale: His symptoms were identical to Mergen's.

Qin Xuan and Madam Qin bombarded Hongjun with questions, but his mind was weighed down with worries; he offered a few words of consolation before excusing himself to go buy the materials he needed to concoct a cure. The capital of Liang Prefecture was an unavoidable stop along the Silk Road, and an ample variety of medicinal herbs were available in its apothecaries, including oblivion flower seeds from the Western Regions and expensive medicaments like snow lotus. But despite having so many ingredients at his disposal, Hongjun had no idea what kind of prescription he ought to prepare.

He regretted not studying harder in the past. Why hadn't he paid more attention when Chong Ming taught him medicine? If anything happened to Mergen… Hongjun's expression turned lost as his mind filled with thoughts of traveling to Shiwei territory to notify Mergen's family and ask them to come see him one last time.

"Don't worry," Li Jinglong said, patting Hongjun on the shoulder. "Just do your best. Whatever happens, I'm here."

Hongjun nodded. He bought some herbs to drive out the cold and improve circulation, but instead of hurrying back after they left the apothecary, Li Jinglong motioned for him to wait. He led them to a seat on the second floor of a restaurant near the alley's entrance and ordered some food.

The restaurant—whose placard read *A Delicious Gathering*—was famed for its lamb dumplings. It was freezing out, and the bowls steamed as the cook ladled out generous portions of nourishing soup made from warming herbs and fish bone broth. The dumpling wrappers were chewy, and the filling—made of lamb and finely shredded carrot and radish—was juicy and sweet, the meat tender and fragrant. Combined with the warming soup, it was a delicacy beyond compare.

Yet worried as he was, even Hongjun didn't have an appetite. Lu Xu took a few bites and burst into tears, scrubbing a hand across his eyes.

The sight of Lu Xu crying upset Hongjun as well. As a child, Hongjun had always been scolded by Chong Ming whenever he cried. The more he cried, the more he would be beaten, so he had learned to swallow back his tears. But when it came to Mergen's illness, even if he wanted to ask for help, there was no one he

could turn to. Overwhelmed, he reached out to try to comfort Lu Xu even as his own eyes grew hot.

There was an awkward silence. “I promise you, Mergen will get better,” Li Jinglong said. “Do you guys trust me or not? Hongjun, when have I ever broken a promise to you?”

This was true, Hongjun thought. Li Jinglong had promised him many things, and he had fulfilled every single one of them. He always kept his word. Hongjun promptly recovered his confidence. “I trust you,” Hongjun said. “But he doesn’t.”

Li Jinglong and Hongjun patted Lu Xu on the head, encouraging him to eat a little more. At last Lu Xu seemed to calm down.

“Is the food good?” Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun was in a much better mood after eating something delicious, but he now was torn. He was still worried about Mergen, but he didn’t dare show his concern, lest Li Jinglong think he didn’t trust him and be cross.

“Try to think of this as one of our usual cases,” Li Jinglong said as he finished his lunch. He leaned back in his seat, watching as people came and went on the streets below from their second-floor table. “Worry will affect your judgment. You have to keep a cool head if you want to spot the key to the riddle.”

Hongjun seemed to grasp his point, so Li Jinglong continued, “Hurry up and eat. How will you have the strength to continue the investigation if you don’t finish your food?”

This time, Lu Xu understood as well. He and Hongjun polished off the dumplings in their bowls. As they stepped back out onto the street, Li Jinglong said, “There’s no need to rush back to prepare the medicine. Let’s go to the market first.”

Hongjun followed in Li Jinglong’s footsteps and watched as he bought a child-sized pair of sheepskin-lined snow boots.

“What are these for?” Hongjun asked.

“You’ll see later,” Li Jinglong said mysteriously.

Next, Li Jinglong bought a thick sheepskin bag and borrowed a pair of shears. He cut several holes into his latest purchase before tying a cord around the bag. Frowning as he examined his handiwork, he said, “There’s not much I can do about the legs. Hongjun, go find me a small pair of arm warmers.”

Hongjun blinked in confusion.

“Buy some more rope too,” Li Jinglong instructed. “The thick and sturdy kind.”

After completing their purchases, they headed to the garrison at the center of the city. Here they found even more ailing soldiers, with over forty barracks filled with the sick. All had the exact same symptoms as Mergen and Qin Liang.

Hongjun was shocked. But when he glanced at Li Jinglong, the chief was completely unfazed, as if he’d expected this to happen.

After a lengthy examination, the field medics all agreed that the patients’ fevers were a consequence of their injuries, but they could provide no further

explanation. The soldiers were all shivering violently, their bodies ice-cold.

"Try this," Hongjun said, handing over his prescription. It wasn't much different from what they'd been giving the soldiers before, so after making a few minor adjustments to their prescriptions, the medics headed off to prepare the medicine.

"How many are sick?" Li Jinglong asked a deputy general. The man hesitated, clearly reluctant to reply for fear of affecting morale. Li Jinglong opened his hand, revealing a wooden token from Geshu Han's estate—Hongjun could only guess how he had pilfered it.

"Thirteen thousand three hundred and seventy-five," the deputy general pronounced. "With more falling ill as we speak."

Yesterday, Geshu Han had led twenty thousand cavalrymen out of the city. All the soldiers who had suffered injuries yesterday were now sick. It was a blow, but not a crippling one: It was said that the capital of Liang Prefecture had fifty thousand armored cavalry and thirty thousand infantry, for a total of eighty thousand troops. They still had the strength for one last stand.

Li Jinglong mounted his horse once more. This time, Hongjun asked no questions as he followed him to the base of a watchtower and they began to climb.

The cold wind whipped past at the top. A hundred thousand corpse ghosts surrounded the city like statues dusted in snow, blending into the frozen landscape.

"What do you think they're doing?" Li Jinglong asked.

"They look like they're waiting," Hongjun answered with a frown.

"But what are they waiting for?" Li Jinglong turned to look at Hongjun.

A hundred thousand corpse ghosts had encircled the city for a full day and night. Why did they not attack? Were they waiting for reinforcements? Not necessarily—but then, what were they waiting for? After a brief silence, realization dawned on Hongjun: Could it be that they were waiting for the soldiers in the city to die of illness?

"Mergen, Qin Liang, and the ten thousand soldiers," Li Jinglong said. "Do you think their illness is the result of poison or a disease carried by the corpse ghosts? This is extremely important, Hongjun."

Hongjun's brow furrowed deeply as he considered it.

"What does your intuition say?" Li Jinglong prompted.

Li Jinglong wanted his gut feeling, so Hongjun answered without thinking: "Poison."

"I agree. It's a poison that kills the living and transforms the dead into corpse ghosts. Wait for me here; I'm going to go out and capture some corpse ghosts to test my theory."

"No, no, no, you can't go!" Hongjun protested.

"I'm immune to the poison," Li Jinglong said.

"You could get trampled to death! There are a hundred thousand soldiers out there!"

“You’re responsible for providing support.”

“No!” Hongjun rejected his proposal. “I’m going with you.”

Li Jinglong grabbed Hongjun by the collar. “I don’t want anything to happen to you!”

Hongjun pulled the cord binding his sleeve free and pushed it up to show Li Jinglong the back of his arm.

Li Jinglong stared in shock. A freshly healed cut from yesterday’s fight snaked up Hongjun’s forearm. He frowned. “Maybe it’s because it was just a small wound.”

Hongjun cast a sidelong glance at Lu Xu standing nearby and said quietly, “This illness only affects humans. I’m different. I’m a yao.”

“Mergen…” Li Jinglong began before he, too, remembered Lu Xu. He shot Hongjun a meaningful look.

“He’s not,” Hongjun said. “His true form is that of an ordinary mortal.”

Li Jinglong was forced to relent. “Fine. But you must be extremely cautious…” Realizing Hongjun was studying him with a smile in his eyes, Li Jinglong gave up his nagging. “Let’s go.”

Li Jinglong and Hongjun swung up astride their horses. They were about to leave when Lu Xu came running out, shouting, “Me! Me!”

“Go back!” Hongjun responded.

Lu Xu tore at the collar of his robes. Hongjun and Li Jinglong both started in surprise at the scars—clearly old and healed over—marring Lu Xu’s collarbones.

“You’re immune too?” Hongjun looked Lu Xu up and down with wide eyes.

Lu Xu grabbed a shovel someone had left sitting by the city gates and strapped it to his back, intent on following them. Li Jinglong had no time to deal with him; he ordered, “Guards! Arrest that man!”

The soldiers swarmed toward Lu Xu at once. Furious, Lu Xu slipped through a gap between them with a rustle of cloth, his figure blurring out of sight in an instant.

“How is he so fast?!” Hongjun had never seen Lu Xu in action before.

Lu Xu appeared again, blocking their horses. “Me!” he shouted again.

“No!” Li Jinglong snapped back.

“I’ll protect him,” Hongjun offered. He understood Lu Xu’s desire to save Mergen. Li Jinglong’s frown deepened, so Hongjun added, “If you were sick, I would be just as worried.”

Exasperated, Li Jinglong said, “Who’s the real boss here? Fine, let’s go!”

Hongjun tucked the rope into his pack, and the trio took off on horseback, approaching the neat formation of fallen corpse ghosts.

All was quiet on the plain outside the city walls. Li Jinglong whispered, “I’ll lure one of them over. Keep a close eye. When you get a chance, trap it with your

pentacolor sacred light."

"Chief…are you sure you'll only lure *one* of them over?" Hongjun asked.

The three reined their horses to a stop and gazed out at the unmoving line of cavalry some thirty yards away. "Why don't I try shooting one down first?" Li Jinglong suggested.

Li Jinglong took aim at one of the corpse ghosts. Hongjun had never practiced mounted combat before; watching Li Jinglong line up the shot from his horse's shifting back, he felt it would be much easier to fight on the ground.

Li Jinglong sighted his target, then let down his shot. He drew and let down several times before finally steeling himself and loosing his arrow.

Hongjun watched, heart in his throat, as the arrow struck a corpse ghost at the front of the formation with a bright *clang*, taking its helmeted head clean off.

The army didn't stir. After a stunned silence, Li Jinglong said, "Let me try again."

He shot a second arrow, beheading a second corpse ghost. Once again, the army didn't move.

Hongjun was struck by a sudden burst of inspiration: The corpse ghosts were lined up neatly in a row—if he were to swing his saber in a horizontal arc… wouldn't that be incredibly efficient?!

Li Jinglong saw Hongjun produce his saber. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"What if they really are just sitting here waiting for their commander? 'Military orders carry the weight of a mountain' and all that, right? Won't a few strikes of my saber take care of them for good?"

Li Jinglong hesitated. "One strike."

The silent army was too eerie. Hongjun tensed his wrists, and his saber began to glow, so bright it appeared nearly transparent.

"How many strikes can you make?" Li Jinglong asked.

"Four at most." It wasn't an issue of the spiritual device's capabilities; Hongjun's spiritual power and cultivation simply couldn't keep up. A single strike from the saber was earth-shatteringly powerful, with force enough to cleave mountains.

"Take one strike each from the north, south, east, and west." Li Jinglong had come around completely. "Do it!"

With a great shout, Hongjun raised his weapon over his shoulder, sweeping the tip of his saber up, then switched to a single-handed grip as he swung his blade in a flat arc toward the army of corpse ghosts before him.

The bright crescent of the saber glare shot from the edge of the blade. This was Li Jinglong's first time truly seeing Hongjun use it. The saber glare scoured a thousand layers of snow from the plain as it whipped toward the formation of fallen corpse ghosts, smashing into the closest ranks of soldiers with a sound like a thunderclap. There was a metallic rumble as nearly two thousand corpse ghosts

crumpled where they stood.

In the next moment, the hundred thousand corpse ghosts outside the city began to move, drawing together to begin their charge.

"Retreat!" Li Jinglong yelled.

"Let me try one more…" Hongjun began.

"No! Run, now! And protect Lu Xu!"

The army surged forth like the tide, surrounding them in an instant. Remembering he had Lu Xu with him, Hongjun turned tail and fled as the line reformed. Li Jinglong swung his blade left and right. Imbued with the light of the heart lamp, the Sword of Wisdom shone even brighter than Hongjun's throwing knives. One slash from its gleaming blade, and the corpse ghosts scattered.

Lu Xu shouted, "Catch! Catch!"

He plucked the rope from Hongjun's pack and jumped from his horse, scaring Hongjun so badly his soul nearly fled his body. "Lu Xu! Get back here!"

Rope in one hand and shovel in the other, Lu Xu spread his arms and sprinted across the snow-covered plain like a falcon skimming across an icy landscape, as fast as a galloping horse.

Li Jinglong had no time to think. "Capture one!"

"Alive!" Lu Xu shouted back. "Half!"

Half? Hongjun was completely lost.

"Not half!" Li Jinglong was surprised Lu Xu remembered his conversation with Mergen the day before. "A whole one! Capture a whole one!"

Lu Xu raced across the snowy plain on foot while Li Jinglong and Hongjun galloped after him on horseback, launching into a high-speed chase through the capital's outskirts with nearly a hundred thousand corpse ghosts on their tail. A commotion broke out atop the city gates as the sentries leaned over the battlements to watch, cheering the three humans on.

Li Jinglong glanced back. "Hongjun, the pentacolor sacred light!"

Hongjun twisted around on his horse and expanded his sacred light, blasting their closest pursuers sky-high with a resounding *boom*.

"The rope!" Li Jinglong yelled.

Lu Xu hurled their makeshift lasso at a corpse ghost and dragged it, flailing, from its horse and onto the ground, towing it behind them through the snow.

"Get another!" Hongjun called out.

"Not necessary!" Li Jinglong hastily interjected, but Hongjun had already unleashed his sacred light, allowing Lu Xu to capture a second corpse ghost. As the trio rounded a hillock, they caught a third. Hongjun hurtled through the snowscape with three rope-lashed corpse ghosts trailing behind his steed.

"Are you that obsessed?!" Li Jinglong demanded. "That's enough! Let's go!"

"Lu Xu, come back!" Hongjun called out.

With a flying leap, Lu Xu bounded up the rope and landed securely in the saddle behind Hongjun. The three of them raced across the barren landscape, dragging the captive corpse ghosts behind them as if towing an ungainly sled. Li Jinglong glanced back again and again, but the massive cavalry continued to pursue them relentlessly even as they urged their horses across a frozen river.

"Crap!" With three captives adding to its burden, Hongjun's horse had begun to slow. "They're not going to keep chasing us like this, are they?!"

"Turn around; strike the river with your saber!" Li Jinglong ordered.

Without hesitation, Hongjun turned to do just that; the saber glare pierced the river's surface and shattered the thick crust of ice.

Tens of thousands of cavalrymen charged straight into the river in an endless torrent, apparently incapable of differentiating between land and water. They made no attempt to bypass the obstacle but continued to throw themselves into the rapids one after another, struggling in vain as the current carried them downstream. Li Jinglong's mouth twitched as he took in the scene.

A low roar reverberated in the distance.

"It's that sound again," he said.

The fallen corpse ghosts abruptly halted their charge and withdrew with the smoothness of a well-trained army, retreating from the bank of the river. The three captives lurched to their feet as well, pulling at their restraints as they staggered toward the sound. Hongjun yanked sharply on the rope, knocking the corpse ghosts off their feet again before turning to follow Li Jinglong toward the city's western gate.

Chapter 53:
The Chief's Wisdom

THE MILITARY TRAINING grounds inside the capital of Liang Prefecture remained brightly lit well into the night. Despite being locked in cages, the three captive corpse ghosts continued to struggle against their restraints in an effort to answer the summons outside the city.

Li Jinglong, Zhang Hao, and a deputy general named Wu Shuang stood within the training grounds, examining their prisoners. Beside the cages lay a pile of corpse-ghost weapons collected by garrison soldiers from beyond the city walls over the course of the evening.

"How is the general doing?" Li Jinglong asked as he sorted through the weapons.

"Poorly," Zhang Hao answered. "His symptoms have worsened significantly. Chief, you should retrieve the token of command. Otherwise, we'll have no way to deploy the troops."

"Does the general have no subordinates who can step in on his behalf?" Li Jinglong asked.

"General Wang has fallen ill as well," Wu Shuang answered. "He's gone back to his estate to rest."

"Who's next in the chain of command?" Li Jinglong asked again.

Wu Shuang and Zhang Hao both lapsed into silence.

Li Jinglong understood at once—Geshu Han was a cautious man. Aside from his trusted confidant General Wang, he permitted no one else to use the token of command.

"But you can," Zhang Hao said. "You have a decree from the crown prince; you can temporarily exercise the powers bestowed by the token of command."

"We should stay put and wait for the fallen corpse ghosts to make their move against the city," Li Jinglong said absently. "If we dispatch troops now, believe me when I say we will merely hasten our own deaths."

After exchanging a look, Wu Shuang and Zhang Hao reluctantly agreed.

"Look at these weapons," Li Jinglong said, lifting one of the sabers to the torchlight. A black stain marked the blade, as if it had been dipped in poison. When Zhang Hao said nothing, Li Jinglong went on, "Now look at these three monsters. The skin of the one on the left is withered, like a dried-up corpse, but nevertheless perfectly intact. But the one in the middle is seriously damaged—its abdomen has been run through, and a number of its internal organs seem to have fallen out. The one on the right is in the worst shape of the three." Li Jinglong lifted the corpse ghost's arm with the saber. The flesh of the creature's hand had rotted off almost completely, revealing a framework of ash-black bones.

"They're wearing different armor too," Wu Shuang noted.

Li Jinglong nodded and pointed at the armor they had stripped off the corpses. “The armor worn by the intact corpse ghost is heavier and more complex in design. In comparison, the most damaged corpse ghost has barely enough armor to cover its body. We can guess that, much like our own military, there’s a hierarchy within the fallen-corpse-ghost army. They have battalion commanders, platoon commanders, squad leaders, all the way down to ordinary cavalrymen.”

As everyone fell into a thoughtful silence, a team of garrison soldiers arrived with a number of frozen corpse ghosts they had dredged from the river.

“The fallen corpse ghosts’ weapons are coated with poison,” Li Jinglong said. “When we fight them again, we must take the necessary precautions—this is the first step. The second step is to find their weakness.”

Zhang Hao glanced at the frigid corpse ghosts. “Ice?”

“Correct,” Li Jinglong answered. “These were soaked in cold water; their joints have frozen over, affecting their movement. They’re also vulnerable to fire.”

Nodding, Wu Shuang doused one of the cages in lamp oil and touched a torch to the corpse ghost inside. Flames licked toward the sky, yet there was no screaming or struggling; the undead soldier burned peacefully until it was reduced to ash.

Hongjun turned his face aside, unable to watch. Li Jinglong murmured beside him, “Think of it this way—even if we bury them, they can’t rest in peace. This way, they’re finally free.”

After a moment of thought, Hongjun realized it was true. These soldiers had laid their lives on the line to protect their country in life, only to be cruelly transformed into killers of their own people in death.

“And what is the third step?” Zhang Hao asked, pensive.

“Prepare our defenses,” Li Jinglong responded. “As for the poisoned soldiers, I’ll think of a way to treat them.”

Zhang Hao and Wu Shuang hurried off to plan for the defense of the city, leaving Li Jinglong and Hongjun to examine the two remaining captives.

Hongjun looked at the corpse ghosts, then glanced back at Li Jinglong. The chief’s brows were slightly furrowed, his eyes thoughtful. Out of everything about him, this was what Hongjun admired most. Although he could never follow Li Jinglong’s thought processes, whenever the chief began to seriously analyze a problem, linking each point to the next with that inscrutable expression, he seemed incredibly powerful to Hongjun. It was a restrained sort of strength, and a fearless kind of courage.

He had every confidence that Li Jinglong would find a way to save Mergen and the others. Li Jinglong had likely realized the crux of the issue the moment Geshu Han collapsed. From there, he had verified his suspicions step-by-step, and in the end, just as he had with the fox yao case, he would turn the tables in their favor.

Hongjun didn’t rush him, nor did he leave, simply standing by Li Jinglong’s side. Many moments later, Li Jinglong broke the silence with a question: “How do you suppose they recognize their fellow soldiers?”

Hongjun considered this. “The corpse ghosts are dead, so they probably don’t have a sense of smell.”

Li Jinglong hummed in thought. “Maybe they do it by sight.”

Most of the corpse ghosts didn’t have pupils—their open eyes showed an unbroken cloudy white. Even so, Hongjun and Li Jinglong had observed their eyes constantly moving; chances were they could see at least a little.

“Can they hear?” Hongjun wondered.

Li Jinglong picked up an iron tray and struck it behind their captives’ ears. The harsh clang was deafening, but neither of the corpse ghosts turned toward the sound, merely continuing to ram themselves against the bars of their iron cages.

Obviously not. Next, Li Jinglong picked up a torch and waved it before the corpse ghosts’ faces. The creatures immediately swung their arms as if to cut down an enemy.

“They can detect light,” Li Jinglong concluded.

“I’ve been wondering—what do you suppose they’re thinking?” Hongjun asked.

“They can’t speak, so only the heavens would know,” Li Jinglong responded. “Let’s try another experiment.”

Watching Li Jinglong remove his outer robe, Hongjun asked, “What are you doing?”

Li Jinglong waved Hongjun over to help him into the corpse-ghost battalion commander’s armor, which fit him surprisingly well. Hongjun had seen all sorts of modern armor, but even so, he found Li Jinglong incredibly handsome and heroic-looking in the rusty iron Han-era armor.

Hunching down, Li Jinglong approached one of the cages. The corpse ghost inside immediately grew wary, opening its mouth to bare its rotting teeth.

“It recognizes you as an enemy,” Hongjun said. “Let me try?”

“What if I dirtied my face?” Li Jinglong suggested instead.

Hongjun gave him an exasperated look before fetching several sticks of charcoal. He smeared them over Li Jinglong’s skin and moved the braziers away. In the dim light, Li Jinglong really did resemble one of the corpse ghosts.

“I’ll try going in,” he said.

Hongjun watched anxiously as Li Jinglong carefully opened the cage and stepped inside. The instant the corpse ghost noticed him, it howled furiously, reaching out to claw at his head.

Li Jinglong hurriedly shouted, “Whoa!” before scrambling back out.

“Maybe try rolling your eyes back?”

“Like this?” Li Jinglong did as Hongjun suggested. “But this way, I can’t see. Do you think it’ll work?”

“It’s hard to say. Maybe they actually can smell you?”

Li Jinglong stripped the other corpse ghost of its smelly, rotted clothes and draped them over his armor. Then, with his eyes rolled back into his skull, he slipped back into the first cage. The corpse ghost was still kicking at the bars in an effort to escape. Li Jinglong mimicked its movements: He tilted his head to the side, reached out with grasping hands, and kicked and clawed at the bars.

"You look just like it!" Hongjun exclaimed admiringly.

The corpse ghost turned to glance at Li Jinglong, and Li Jinglong met its gaze with his own rolled-back eyes.

Man and corpse ghost stared at each other for a fraught moment. The corpse ghost looked away.

Success!

To experiment, Li Jinglong stopped rolling back his eyes; the corpse ghost didn't notice. Apparently, the corpse ghosts could see and smell to some degree, but couldn't hear.

"I'll go out later tonight." Li Jinglong sniffed at his own arm, wrinkling his nose at the foul stench.

"I'm going with you," Hongjun said.

"Of course you are," Li Jinglong said with a smile.

As the night stretched on, Hongjun went to check on Mergen. The medicinal soup he had prescribed had had some effect—at least, Mergen's body had warmed up slightly—but Mergen hadn't woken since the morning. Lu Xu grasped Hongjun's sleeve and hung on tightly, refusing to let him leave.

"Hush," Hongjun whispered. "The chief will save him; don't worry."

After checking on Mergen, Hongjun next went to see Geshu Han. The old general had fallen unconscious after taking his medicine, but the madam had recovered from her shock. She sat by her husband's bedside, holding his hand and speaking quietly with the carp yao.

"If I were to leave Hongjun, I don't know what he'd do," the carp yao was saying. "He doesn't understand anything."

Alarmed, Hongjun hurried forward with an explanation on his lips when the madam stopped him with a nod and a smile. He asked, "Zhao Zilong didn't scare you, did he?"

The madam laughed. "How could he scare me? I've lived half an age, and I've seen all there is to see. The soldiers outside the city walls are all yaoguai, aren't they? We'll be relying on you children this time. No matter what happens, you must be careful."

"Of course," the carp yao agreed. "I'll have you know my Hongjun defeated a yao king—but with Li Jinglong slowing him down, it's hard to say…"

"Careful the chief doesn't toss you into a stew," Hongjun said as he stepped forward to check Geshu Han's pulse. After taking the medicine, his pulse had stabilized; Hongjun's prescription was doing *something*. Although it wasn't a cure,

the medicine had raised Geshu Han's body temperature and improved his circulation.

Hongjun could hear Li Jinglong and Zhang Hao outside in the courtyard, apparently in the middle of an argument. As their conversation concluded, Li Jinglong strode into the house with a deep frown, signaling to Hongjun with his eyes: *Time to go*.

"The general hasn't shown himself for a full day. Rumors have begun to spread through the city." Zhang Hao had followed Li Jinglong inside. "We won't be able to contain the situation much longer."

"General Zhang," Li Jinglong said, his voice low, "we must contain it as long as it takes."

"Why don't I go speak with them," the madam said.

Zhang Hao waved a hand to turn her down before glancing back at Li Jinglong. "Where are you two going?"

Li Jinglong merely motioned for Hongjun to get moving. He pointed at the carp yao, instructing him to follow.

It was approaching midnight; all was silent as they exited the city.

The carp yao yelped the moment he stepped onto the snowy ground. "It's freezing!"

"Hurry up," Hongjun said. "This all depends on you, Zhao Zilong. Didn't you want to save lives and accumulate merits? Well, there are over four hundred thousand people waiting to be saved in the city."

The carp yao plodded through the snow. "Isn't there any easier way to go about it?"

"Here," Li Jinglong said as he took out the children's boots he'd bought earlier.

The carp yao put them on. "This is better, but it's still freezing out here."

Li Jinglong dug out the fleece-lined sheepskin bag, fitted it over Zhao Zilong's head, and tied it off with a length of cord. The carp yao's arms and legs slotted perfectly into the holes Li Jinglong had cut, and he could even see through the sides.

Hongjun was incredulous.

"You can use the arm warmers as pants," Li Jinglong explained as he finished arming Zhao Zilong against the cold. Now the carp yao had no more excuses.

"Find the king of the fallen corpse ghosts," Li Jinglong told him. "Once you know where he is, come back and report to me. Go."

The carp yao had no choice but to scurry off across the snowy field in search of the ghost king Li Jinglong had described.

Li Jinglong sat patiently at the base of the city walls and waited. As the wind picked up, Hongjun scooted closer to huddle against him. They both wore the corpse ghosts' foul-smelling Han-era armor. It was a bitterly cold night. Li Jinglong took out a blanket from his pack and wrapped it around them.

Hongjun smiled at Li Jinglong, recalling their first meeting. The chief had been wearing a full suit of armor back then as well—why hadn't Hongjun found him so handsome then?

"What are you smiling about?" Li Jinglong asked, noticing Hongjun's expression.

"Nothing," Hongjun responded. "This armor's all rusted, but you look nice."

"Well, of course," Li Jinglong quipped. "You've no idea how many girls in Chang'an fell for your gege when I went out in my military uniform back in the day."

"You're becoming more and more shameless," Hongjun said.

As Li Jinglong laughed, Hongjun remembered the madam's story and how, as a young girl, she had fallen in love at first sight with Geshu Han riding out in his armor. Perhaps Li Jinglong was not so different from the old general in his youth.

"Well, what about me?" Hongjun asked.

"You're…" Li Jinglong studied him, then announced, "You'll do, I suppose. Handsome enough to be my deputy."

Hongjun lifted his hand out of the blanket and made a fist. "Let's fight. We'll see who's the deputy."

"It's freezing—stop messing around." Li Jinglong shoved his hand back down.

Inside the general's estate, it had been over sixteen hours since Geshu Han and Mergen collapsed. The capital of Liang Prefecture was brightly lit, but the city seemed to hold itself in morbid stillness, the moans of the sick soldiers in the barracks growing softer by the hour.

During the latter half of the night, Mergen began to wheeze, his every inhale and exhale rasping like a bellows. Mad with anxiety, Lu Xu hurried from the room, instinctively seeking Hongjun for help.

"Hongjun!" He searched the entire length of the estate's winding corridor and ran toward the main hall. Confusion crossed his face as he spotted a soldier's figure within, and his feet slowed to a stop.

"What is it?" the madam asked as she turned to look at her visitor, Geshu Han's hand still clutched in her own.

Zhang Hao stood before her. "The fallen corpse ghosts may attack the city at any moment. I must have the token of command."

"The general has yet to wake. He cannot give it to you," the madam replied with a frown. "Li Jinglong said he would find a cure tonight."

"Li Jinglong and Hongjun have fled the city," Zhang Hao said. "The soldiers saw them leave earlier."

Hidden behind a shelf, Lu Xu watched Zhang Hao, his expression perplexed.

“I’m not going anywhere with the general in this state,” the madam said. “Zhang Hao, where is Wu Shuang?”

Zhang Hao sucked in a deep breath. He said, voice low, “Madam, Wu Shuang has fallen ill as well. This matter is urgent—I must deploy troops as quickly as possible if we’re to stop the enemy.”

The silence stretched. At last, the madam spoke. “No.”

As Zhang Hao frowned, she continued, “I trust Li Jinglong and that child. Just now, I heard the story of how they defeated the yao king of Chang’an. In such an extraordinary situation, we must rely on extraordinary people. You need only guard your city, for which you have all the authority you require. So long as you do not send soldiers beyond the city walls, you can deploy the troops however you see fit. Mortals like us mustn’t fantasize about fighting monsters.”

Zhang Hao’s lips pulled into a sneer.

The old madam tensed as she looked up at Zhang Hao. Her voice trembled. “Zhang Hao, what is the meaning of this? Do you intend to take the token of command by force?”

Zhang Hao lowered his voice to a growl. “Madam, I *am* the monster.”

The general threw back his head in a terrible roar as his body melted like mud, squelching wetly as he moved. A greenish-black gas gushed from his mouth, curling tightly around the madam’s body and choking her into silence before she could scream for help.

“Ahhh—!”

Jumping from behind the shelf, Lu Xu picked up a flower vase and charged at Zhang Hao’s slowly liquefying body.

Chapter 54:
Head of the Snake

ZHANG HAO never dreamed there was someone standing ten steps behind him.

Under normal circumstances, no one would shout when launching an ambush. If they did, then just as thunder follows lightning, most people would swing only after yelling *Die!* or something similar. Yet not only did Lu Xu shout, he unleashed thunder and lightning together in a single strike, his half-uttered cry arriving in unison with the vase that smashed into the back of Zhang Hao's head.

Focused on releasing his spiritual power, Zhang Hao was caught completely off guard. The vase caved in his skull, and he crashed headfirst onto the bed.

"You're dead meat…" Zhang Hao's flesh had turned sludge-like, revealing his monstrous true form. He struggled to his feet with a wet sucking sound and launched himself at Lu Xu.

Lu Xu had never seen such a creature. Zhang Hao discharged vast quantities of noxious greenish-yellow gas, his clothes splitting at the seams as his skin turned a sallow brown. Lu Xu hastily backed away, darting behind an open shelf filled with antiques.

"Hongjun!" he yelled.

Lu Xu pushed the shelf over, trying to pin Zhang Hao under it, but the monster moved like a living swamp, oozing through the shelf to rush at Lu Xu.

Hearing the din, the estate guards outside barged in shouting, "Assassin!"

Lu Xu barely had time to register the guards' screams as he dodged attack after attack. The sludge monster charged at the newcomers and swallowed two men in an instant, their flesh and skin rotting away amid a cacophony of agonized wails. It gagged and spat out a handful of indigestible scraps of iron armor before leaping over the doorsill and hurling itself after Lu Xu, who had taken off through the garden.

The youth's feet slowed as he turned to look at the sludge in shock. But the monster had no intention of letting him go. It barreled its way through the flower garden. A maidservant hurried out at the sound of the racket and shrieked hysterically upon seeing the sludge. She made it only a few steps before the sludge monster swallowed her up as well.

The sludge chased Lu Xu out of the garden, devouring any servants in its way. A head appeared within the muck, bearing Zhang Hao's likeness. Lu Xu didn't dare lead him toward any more people, so he dashed back in and put his hands around a shovel just as the sludge rushed over.

"Why?! Why aren't you affected by the miasma?!" Zhang Hao howled. "That's not possible!" A pair of hands formed in the sludge as it once again lunged at Lu Xu, fingers reaching for his throat.

Lu Xu swung the shovel in a neat arc.

With a resounding *thunk*, Zhang Hao's head sailed through the air like a polo ball and landed beyond the courtyard wall.

Lu Xu leapt into the air, avoiding the sludge's grasping arms. The monster spewed poisonous gas as it twisted blindly, chasing after Lu Xu, but Lu Xu was too fast—in a few quick scoops, he had shoveled up the headless sludge and tossed it out of the flower garden.

"Hongjun!" Lu Xu bellowed.

Shovel in hand, he scanned his surroundings with wild eyes, lost for what to do. After a moment of thought, he set his shovel against his shoulder and hurried back to the main hall to check on Geshu Han and the madam.

The carp yao scuttled through wind and snow as he slipped surreptitiously into the fallen corpse ghosts' formation.

The rasp of armor echoed in the distance. He turned and saw that the corpse ghosts seemed to be moving. The carp yao flattened himself against the ground, his tail flicking a few times before falling still as he played dead. A number of rotting warhorses swept through the rear of the formation, carrying their riders off on patrol. When they had passed, the carp yao once again scurried through the line of corpse ghosts until he arrived at the foot of a hill.

In the bitter wind at its top, a general sat astride a towering warhorse, shoulders covered in snow. Ducking behind a large rock, the carp yao peeked half his head out and watched as the general drew his sword. The blade had five holes along its length, which hummed faintly in the wind. The sound was deep and resonant, a match for the strange roar Hongjun and Li Jinglong had heard the other day. The general's body crawled with a dark energy, which twisted around his sword like a black flame, giving off a sustained thrum that reverberated in wave after wave into the distance.

Beneath the city wall, Li Jinglong and Hongjun stirred at the sound. The massive corpse-ghost army slowly began to move.

"What's going on?" Hongjun's nerves were singing. At the same time, the quiescent city behind them erupted in frenzied shouts—something was happening inside the prefectural capital.

Li Jinglong jumped to his feet, but before he could make any decision, the carp yao reappeared.

"Found him!" he announced. The carp yao described what he had seen.

"Damn it," Li Jinglong cursed, already striding off. "Something's going on in the city—they're clearly coordinating their attacks! We need to hurry!"

The cavalry milled in the distance as Li Jinglong motioned for Hongjun to follow. Chasing after him, Hongjun whispered, "What about the city?!"

"Deal with the outside forces first!" Li Jinglong returned. "Zhao Zilong, lead the way."

Rank upon rank, from the van to the rear, the massive undead army heaved into motion. Li Jinglong and Hongjun sprinted along the bank of a creek until they reached a copse of trees. Hongjun tied two of his throwing knives to a length of rope and, spinning it in his hand, hurled the makeshift meteor hammer out to snare a foot soldier. Li Jinglong dropped to one knee, shoving the corpse ghost down with a palm flaring with the power of the heart lamp. The struggling corpse ghost fell still, laid to rest by that flash of brilliant light.

Hongjun swung the knives again and dragged in another corpse ghost; a second flash of light followed. Li Jinglong collected the foot soldiers' spears and handed one to Hongjun. They gazed nervously into the distance from under the cover of the trees. As a regiment of infantrymen passed by, they dashed out with their spears in hand and blended into the formation.

The corpse king twisted his sword, and the sound moaning across the field changed. The lines of infantry curved like a winding dragon, coiling around the snowcapped hill, while the cavalry stretched into a thin line along their outer perimeter.

Hongjun was baffled. How did the corpse ghosts know which way to move? Sometimes they turned left, while other times they turned right, following no logic he could see. After running around for a while, he realized to his horror that he had lost Li Jinglong in the darkness.

As he frantically searched his surroundings, a hand grabbed him from behind and dragged him into the formation. Hongjun nearly shouted in alarm before Li Jinglong hissed, "It's me!"

Li Jinglong pulled him along as he followed the foot soldiers turning this way and that, moving closer and closer to the eye of the formation with each pass.

Are you kidding me?! Hongjun thought. *This is like a maze—how in the world did you find your way through without being discovered?!*

Unbeknownst to him, Li Jinglong had learned quite a lot when he had trained with the imperial guard. The Mighty Tiger, the Coiled Snake, the Hawk's Wing… He could hardly be more familiar with these tactical formations. The moment the infantry began to circle around, he knew the ghost king was implementing a Coiled Snake formation within an Immovable Mountain formation.

As Hongjun and Li Jinglong slowly made their way toward the hill, the undead foot soldiers came to an abrupt halt, armor rattling. Hongjun nearly pitched over and was only saved by Li Jinglong, who had anticipated the stop and reached out a hand to steady him. The two raised their spears and stood just behind the hill, where the figure of the ghost king was clearly visible.

The cavalrymen standing in the frontmost rank lifted their halberds as one and pointed them at the city in the distance. The capital of Liang Prefecture seemed to have caught fire, red flames licking up and illuminating the night sky. Hongjun stared in shock—what was going on in there?!

He turned to glance at Li Jinglong, who shot him a sharp look. His meaning couldn't have been clearer if he'd spoken it aloud: *Do not lose focus!* It was imperative that they capture the ghost king; there was no hope for them otherwise.

The ghost king, standing on high, raised his sword. Black flame erupted from the blade with a deafening cry like the roar of a dragon.

On this signal, the undead cavalrymen charged, powdery snow flying in their wake as hooves pounded the ground like a divine drumbeat shaking the earth. The scene took Hongjun's breath away. Although he had crossed swords with the fallen corpse ghosts yesterday, he had never witnessed the grandeur of fifty thousand riders storming across the battlefield. Their overwhelming might seemed enough to flatten the prefectural capital beneath their charge.

The cavalry galloped ahead, and the infantry rushed after them like the tide. Spear in hand, Li Jinglong followed with Hongjun a step behind. As the foot soldiers split into two wings, skirting the snowcapped hill, Li Jinglong broke away and sprinted up the slope.

The ghost king noticed their approach at once, whipping around to face his attackers just as Li Jinglong leapt through the air and brought the Sword of Wisdom slashing down with a furious shout.

Within the prefectural capital, Zhang Hao had given up on catching Lu Xu. He melted back into sludge form, steadily growing in size as he crushed each round of cavalry reinforcements that stood in his path, swallowing the soldiers and spitting out their armor and weaponry.

He arrived at the city gates fully energized. The city gates, having recently been destroyed by Hongjun, now consisted of a jumble of randomly assembled wooden stakes. As the sentries backed away in terror, the sludge resolidified into Zhang Hao.

"Open the gates," he said with a menacing smile.

The sentries stood frozen, none daring to step forward. Zhang Hao unleashed his miasma, and screams erupted beneath the city gates as the sentries succumbed to the noxious gas and collapsed, one after another.

Inside the walls, the city burned, while outside, a massive enemy force bore down on the gates.

The fallen-corpse-ghost king parried Li Jinglong's strike with a harsh *clang* that sent waves of sound reverberating in all directions.

Hongjun darted forward and hurled all four of his throwing knives at the ghost king, knocking his helmet from his head with a metallic shriek. The ghost king's long hair whipped free in the wind as he stood tall atop the snowy hill in his black armor.

Hongjun gaped in shock. He'd imagined the ghost king as some sort of terrifying monster; he could never have guessed that aside from his pale, grayish-blue skin, he would look no different from an ordinary man—and a shockingly handsome man at that!

The infantrymen abandoned their charge and looked up at their king. But the undead general didn't seem to fear his attackers at all. With a wave of his hand, the

corpse-ghost army resumed its assault.

Now's our chance! Li Jinglong thought. *He's underestimated us!*

He raised the Sword of Wisdom, infusing it with a bright glow that sent afterimages of his blade scattering across the sky and shooting toward the ghost king. The ghost king swiftly blocked the strike with his wind blade, matching Li Jinglong in strength.

"Look out!" Li Jinglong shouted as he flipped through the air, seeing the ghost king turn toward Hongjun.

The ghost king swung his fist at Hongjun, who raised his pentacolor sacred light. The punch struck his light shield with force enough to splinter stone and shatter the sky; Hongjun slid nearly ten steps back, leaving a pair of skid marks in the snow before landing hard on the ground.

Watching Hongjun spit out a mouthful of blood and stagger to his feet, Li Jinglong realized that the ghost king hadn't underestimated them—he simply had nothing to fear from them at all.

Hongjun cried out in horror as the ghost king turned back toward Li Jinglong and wound up for another punch. Risking a strike to the face, Li Jinglong blocked the ghost king's fist with the Sword of Wisdom and shoved his other hand against his opponent's chest.

The heart lamp erupted in the instant the ghost king's fist connected.

Hongjun stumbled forward, but it was too late. He heard the *crunch* of bone followed by a blinding burst of light. In the next moment, Li Jinglong was crashing down the hill, his eyes bleeding from the force of the blow.

The ghost king reeled back howling as black energy poured from his body, fingers going limp around the hilt of his wind blade. Seizing his opportunity, the carp yao darted out, quick as an arrow leaving the string, and took a flying leap, snatching the ghost king's sword. "Got it!"

"Chief!" Hongjun shouted.

He dashed over to help Li Jinglong up, entirely forgetting about the ghost king as he dug out some medicine for Li Jinglong. The man had fainted on the spot and was bleeding from his eyes and nose.

On the other side of the hill, the ghost king swayed on his feet, casting about for his sword.

Hongjun shoved a medicinal pellet past his lips, and Li Jinglong came to with a gasp. Struggling to his feet, he gritted out, "Get…get his sword!"

The carp yao had scurried a short distance away, cradling the wind blade. "Stop the corpse ghosts' attack!" Hongjun shouted.

"How am I supposed to do that?!" The carp yao looked toward the prefectural capital. The undead cavalry had breached the ramshackle city gates with a thunderous crash and were storming in uncontested. "Hey!" he shouted as he swung the sword furiously at the army in the distance. "Ha!"

As expected, not a single corpse ghost paid him any mind.

Hongjun watched the army break through the city gates, then glanced back at Zhao Zilong just in time to see the ghost king staggering toward the carp yao. “Run!” he shouted. “He’s behind you!”

The carp yao took to his heels, running for his life with the wind blade in his arms. After the blast from Li Jinglong’s heart lamp, the ghost king’s yao energy seemed to have dispersed. He turned shakily, as if recalling that Li Jinglong and Hongjun were his true opponents, and abandoned Zhao Zilong to rush toward the humans once more.

Shoving Li Jinglong aside, Hongjun shouted, “Come at me!”

A single punch from the ghost king could crumple a mountain. Hongjun didn’t dare fight him head-on; he settled for leading him on a wild chase around the foot of the hill while Li Jinglong scrambled on his hands and knees, searching for the Sword of Wisdom in the snow.

As the ghost king picked up speed behind him, Hongjun sprang into the air. Combining his four throwing knives to form his saber, he turned back and slashed fiercely at his pursuer—but the ghost king was just as fast. He jerked his head to the side, and Hongjun’s blade sliced through nothing but a few strands of silky black hair, which fluttered down to land in the snow. Behind him, the hill rumbled as its crest slid down its slope, sliced clean off by Hongjun’s strike.

The ghost king swung his fist in a powerful hook, aiming for Hongjun’s saber.

Hongjun was still airborne; he couldn’t change direction, so he shook out his saber, disassembling it back into four throwing knives with a ringing of metal. The blades arced through the air, but instead of burrowing into the ghost king’s flesh, they sliced through the chain-link bindings of the ghost king’s iron armor in a chord of bright clangs.

The ghost king took a flying leap, and the armor sloughed off him, revealing his red-and-black combat robes and immediately lightening his body’s load. Hongjun ducked beneath his opponent’s arm and whipped around, planting one foot on the ghost king’s back to launch himself into the air once more, the two combatants brushing past each other in opposite directions.

Hongjun had put his all into that strike; nevertheless, he summoned his throwing knives as he darted past the ghost king, transforming them back into his saber and charging at his opponent.

A few paces away, Li Jinglong had finally recovered the Sword of Wisdom. With a furious shout, he rushed forward from the opposite direction.

The ghost king stared at Hongjun, his face devoid of expression. Then, with a rustle of fabric, he flickered out of sight.

Crap! Hongjun thought in dismay. *He’s as fast as Lu Xu!*

The ghost king flipped over in midair and sent Li Jinglong flying with a vicious kick. Hongjun slashed again with his saber, but he couldn’t get close enough to deal any damage. As the air once again filled with afterimages, the ghost king lunged, flicking a finger against the flat of Hongjun’s blade.

Hongjun felt the thrum in his bones as the ghost king's true strength slammed into him, leaving him half paralyzed. His saber slipped from numb fingers, and the ghost king kicked him in the chest, smashing Hongjun into the snow with such force he retched up bile.

The ghost king grabbed the saber and turned on Li Jinglong without sparing Hongjun another glance.

Li Jinglong tucked one hand behind his back, gathering the power of the heart lamp in his palm. He was determined to hit the ghost king with another blast of light even at risk to his own life. Behind the ghost king, Hongjun writhed in the snow. His chest ached fiercely, as if he had been struck by a thousand-pound weight.

The ghost king approached Li Jinglong with slow steps. Li Jinglong's eyes went wide when he saw Hongjun's saber in his hand, pointed straight at his own chest.

Hongjun gritted his teeth. "Chief!"

Gathering the last of his strength, Hongjun unleashed the pentacolor sacred light just as Qing Xiong had taught him. The light barrier engulfed the broken crest of the snowcapped hill he had cleaved off earlier, now a chunk of frozen earth covering a massive slab of stone that weighed tens of thousands of pounds. He flipped over and shouted, "Move!"

Li Jinglong rolled out of the way on command. The moment the ghost king looked back, Hongjun gave the pentacolor sacred light a shove. The massive stone crashed down with a deafening rumble, crushing the ghost king in a flurry of rock and snow.

Pain spiked through Li Jinglong's chest. His nose was still bleeding freely, bright blood splattering onto the snow.

"I…didn't know what else to do," Hongjun gasped. "I thought he was going to kill you… But now, there might be no way to get the antidote…"

Li Jinglong waved a weary hand. "I…didn't expect him to be so strong."

They met each other's eyes. "I'll move the rock after I rest a minute," Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong turned toward the city gates in the distance but could see no sentries on the walls. He could only guess what had happened. "We have to hurry," he said. "Where's Zhao Zilong?!"

Upon seeing that the ghost king had been subdued, the carp yao scurried over with the wind blade clutched in his arms. "Any yaoguai would die after being crushed like that, right?" he asked shakily.

Just as he said it, the colossal mound of terra firma rumbled and began to shudder and shift.

"Heavens above!" the carp yao squeaked, scared out of his wits.

"What do we do?!" Hongjun yelped.

"Zhao Zilong! The oblivion pollen!" Li Jinglong barked.

The carp yao stared at him, flummoxed. Li Jinglong punted the fish over just as the corpse ghost lifted the enormous chunk of rock. “Hongjun, pack the space around him with snow!” he ordered.

The carp yao couldn’t even spare the breath to scream for help as he scrambled to scatter the oblivion pollen in his pocket. “Wait, not yet!” he yelped.

The oblivion pollen dispersed. Heaving his burden aloft, the ghost king took one sniff and let out an earth-shattering sneeze.

“A—choo!”

With a thunderous crash, the giant mass of stone smashed down once more. Hongjun spread his hands, expanding the pentacolor sacred light to gather up the surrounding snow. When he had pushed a pile around the ghost king, Li Jinglong shouted, “Fire!”

Maintaining the sacred light with his left hand, Hongjun released a roaring flame with his right. It twisted around the boulder like a fire dragon and melted the snow in an instant.

“Snow!” Li Jinglong ordered again.

Hongjun shoved more snow toward the center. Layer after layer of packed snow melted and turned into ice until finally, there was no more movement beneath the stone.

The battered hill was quiet. Li Jinglong exchanged a look with Hongjun, who sat down weakly on the ground, still recovering from their battle with the ghost king. If not for Li Jinglong’s quick thinking, they would most likely be dead.

Li Jinglong limped over to check his condition. Both had suffered internal injuries. After taking a few minutes to catch their breath, Li Jinglong took the wind blade from the carp yao and examined it carefully.

The storm had ceased to blow, but in the distance, frantic shouts echoed from the prefectural capital.

“Let’s go!” Li Jinglong said.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun mounted their horses and sped back toward the city, hauling the massive block of ice holding the ghost king between them.

The fallen-corpse-ghost cavalry had smashed through the city gates. The streets were in an uproar, and a fire had broken out. A number of human cavalrymen were engaging the enemy on their own, while a huge pool of sentient sludge oozed in the middle of the street, laughing menacingly.

“What is *that*?!” Hongjun gaped.

“That…that’s a…” Zhao Zilong stuttered in shock.

Li Jinglong had begun climbing a watchtower to take stock of the situation. He paused and looked down at the carp yao in surprise. “You’ve seen it before?”

“Nope,” the carp yao responded.

Hongjun and Li Jinglong gave him a look.

Li Jinglong sheathed the Sword of Wisdom and picked up the wind blade with a thoughtful frown. “How do I order them to retreat?”

“Worry about that later—just try swinging it!” Hongjun urged.

Steeling himself, Li Jinglong infused the wind blade with the power of the heart lamp, dispelling the black energy from the steel. The sword flashed white and began to hum shrilly, like a whistle slicing through the night. The corpse-ghost cavalrymen glanced back at Li Jinglong, then fell into formation and prepared to charge Geshu Han’s estate.

“No, no!” Hongjun yelped. “Not like that!”

Li Jinglong hastily switched tactics, using the heart lamp’s power to activate the tone holes along the blade and play a different note. The undead army switched formations, drawing back and lining up on either side of the street.

“That’s the one!” Hongjun said. “Now march them out of the city!”

Li Jinglong tried to make the fallen corpse ghosts change formations again. The sounds of slaughter dwindled to nothing as the corpse soldiers within the prefectural capital quietly gathered outside the general’s estate.

The sludge monster turned toward the city gates.

“Chief, order the corpse ghosts to kill that yaoguai—quick!” Hongjun cried.

“You do it if you’re so capable!” Li Jinglong snapped, out of patience. “I haven’t figured out how to use this thing yet!”

Hongjun waved his hands placatingly; he definitely wasn’t capable.

“Li Jinglong,” the sludge hissed as it took on the oozing form of Zhang Hao. “You’ve ruined my plans once again!”

Li Jinglong stared at Zhang Hao and said, voice low, “I never expected a traitor to be the source of this evil. Who do you work for?!”

Zhang Hao sneered. “Even if you have the general’s sword, there’s nothing you can do. You may have defeated Liu Fei, but do you truly think you’ve won?!”

Heart thundering with anxiety, Hongjun activated the pentacolor sacred light. In its glow, he caught sight of Lu Xu walking out within the protective circle of soldiers at the gates of the general’s estate, staring anxiously out at the sludge monster. Hongjun breathed a sigh of relief; if Lu Xu was here, then Mergen, at least, was safe.

Noticing the noxious fumes emanating from Zhang Hao’s body, Li Jinglong guessed he was a yaoguai that spread poison. There was no time for further interrogation; Zhang Hao had to be subdued as quickly as possible. Li Jinglong twisted his wrist, and the wind blade once again began to flare with blinding light.

The fallen corpse ghosts turned as one, heeding the hum of the wind blade, and charged toward the sludge monster.

“It worked!” Hongjun cheered.

The corpse ghosts scattered through the city turned around one after another, gathering in the main streets of the prefectural capital. The archers took aim at the

sludge while the cavalrymen charged down the enemy. Zhang Hao's poison had no effect on the dead; he could only retreat as the corpse ghosts hemmed him in. Realizing the tide had turned, Zhang Hao overleapt the heads of the encircling soldiers with a roar, knocking over the corpses blocking his way as he fled out the gates of the city.

Pouring all his focus into the wind blade, Li Jinglong swung it time and again, the sword's sharp whine growing in volume with each pass. The undead soldiers surged into a single mass and charged out the city gates in a fearsome stampede.

The sludge monster that had once been Zhang Hao kept running, emitting a string of garbled cries as a hundred thousand corpse ghosts hurtled after him in a wild chase across the snow-covered plain outside the city.

"Close the city gates!" Li Jinglong shouted.

With a raucous cheer, the sentries rushed to seal the city gates. Hongjun sprinted to a corner of the watchtower and looked out as the undead army doggedly pursued the sludge monster into the distance, disappearing beyond the shadow of the horizon just as dawn broke.

At noon, sunlight spilled over the city. Much of the prefectural capital was in ruins after the fire and the battle. Since chasing the sludge monster out of the city, the corpse-ghost army had not reappeared.

Anxious to investigate the clues they had gathered, Li Jinglong sent no soldiers in pursuit. After performing a head count of the city's troops—thankfully, the casualties were not severe—he assigned a large company of soldiers to guard the city gates and ordered the giant ice block containing the ghost king dragged into the general's estate, where Geshu Han was still on his sickbed. After the events of last night, the madam had fallen ill again as well.

The situation had been baffling from beginning to end; their only hope for learning the truth lay with this monstrous general.

"What happened?" Hongjun asked Lu Xu as he checked on Mergen, who seemed to be, if not better, at least stable.

Lu Xu glared furiously at Hongjun, as if to say, *I spent all yesterday shouting for you! Where have you been?!*

The estate guards had lugged the block of ice into the entrance hall, periodically dousing it with water to prevent the ghost king from breaking free. Li Jinglong studied the frozen ghost king from a short distance away, where he stood in the chilly sunlight.

"This much is clear," Li Jinglong said quietly. "The fallen corpse ghosts have been massacring villages to strengthen their army. Using some special technique, they've been transforming the dead into soldiers like themselves."

Chapter 55:
A Wake-Up Call

AS HONGJUN digested this pronouncement, Li Jinglong continued, “The massacres along the border and the attack on the prefectural capital today…they were all to bolster their numbers. Zhang Hao is a yaoguai who spreads poison. His origin is mysterious, but he’s likely acting on someone’s orders. Mergen, the old general, the soldiers in the city—their illness is his doing.”

“But who’s the one giving him orders?” Hongjun asked.

“We’ll have to ask him to find out,” Li Jinglong said, turning to the ghost king. “Let’s begin.”

Hongjun melted the ice around the ghost king’s arms, then stepped back to allow the soldiers to clap iron chains around his wrists. They repeated the process with his feet, and after all the manacles and iron locks had been put in place, Li Jinglong wrapped lengths of rope soaked in water around the ghost king’s wrists and ankles to ensure he wouldn’t break free.

Finally, the soldiers dragged the block of ice containing the ghost king to the training grounds, where they chained the whole thing to a stone pillar. With a loud *crack*, the ice shattered over the ground as the ghost king broke free.

Li Jinglong had no time to waste. He needed to figure out how to cure the poison plaguing Mergen and the others, and he needed to find out who was orchestrating this plot from behind the scenes.

“Liu Fei?” Li Jinglong asked, holding a cold compress to his own swollen left eye.

The ghost king slowly lifted his head at the sound of his name. His eyes, like the other fallen corpse ghosts, were a cloudy white, only distinguished by the faintly visible outline of his pupils.

“Give us the antidote,” Li Jinglong said, his voice grave.

Watching the interrogation unfold, Hongjun’s heart was in his throat. The ghost king lifted his chin, his expression unchanged as he turned his eyes skyward. Lu Xu stepped forward, but Hongjun pulled him back with a shake of the head.

“Give us the antidote!” Li Jinglong demanded, his voice rising. His hand began to glow with the power of the heart lamp. The ghost king let out a muffled howl, struggling against his bindings in clear agony as the light shone over his body.

A tendril of fear unfurled in Hongjun’s chest as Li Jinglong extinguished the heart lamp. This was his first time witnessing Li Jinglong interrogate a yaoguai so harshly—but if he didn’t, Mergen and the others might die.

“Maybe he can’t talk?” Hongjun wondered aloud. Throughout all their encounters, he had never seen any of the corpse ghosts speak.

“Give him a brush and paper,” Li Jinglong instructed one of the soldiers, who ran off to fetch the items.

The ghost king took the brush in his bound hands while the soldier placed a piece of paper on a wooden tray before him.

"If you want to live, tell us the truth," Li Jinglong said.

It was an odd choice of words—after all, it made little sense to offer the dead a chance to live. After a moment of silence, the corpse ghost flung aside the brush with a furious roar. The soldier standing before him yelped and scrambled back in terror.

Near the end of his patience, Li Jinglong raised his fist as if to strike the ghost king in the face, but the ghost king showed no sign of fear. He twisted against the iron chains, as if to mock his captor—*You've chained me down; why not release me and fight me properly if you're so tough?*

Li Jinglong was incensed, but he nevertheless swallowed his anger and turned to leave.

"What are we going to do?" Hongjun asked anxiously, trailing in Li Jinglong's wake.

"I don't know," Li Jinglong said irritably. "How are the patients?"

Hongjun had already checked on Mergen and Geshu Han. Their conditions had stabilized after taking the medicine he'd prescribed, but they remained unconscious. He had no idea when they might take a turn for the worse.

"Let me think." Li Jinglong threw himself down on a couch in a side hall and sat cross-legged. After days of inadequate rest, he was barely hanging on.

"Liu Fei, Liu Fei…" Li Jinglong murmured absently to himself as he recalled Zhang Hao's words. "Who was the ghost king before he died? Is there a general named Liu Fei in the history books?"

What they most needed was to get him to talk. Hongjun was about to head back out when Li Jinglong called to him. "Stay with me a while, Hongjun. I'm exhausted."

Li Jinglong had meticulously plotted their every move. The pieces of his plan had fit together seamlessly, allowing him to successfully defeat the enemy via a strategic strike against their leader. Yet he had never expected to fail in this final step. Nor had he foreseen Zhang Hao's betrayal. If only he had been more vigilant—if he had caught Zhang Hao earlier—perhaps he wouldn't have so few options now.

Hongjun proposed a different idea: "What if he's just a puppet? Maybe the ghost king and the other corpse soldiers don't have free will at all?"

"Not possible," Li Jinglong answered after a moment of thought. "His martial skills, physical agility, and leadership abilities aren't qualities one would see in a mere puppet."

As Hongjun fell into a pensive silence, Li Jinglong stretched out on the couch. "I'm taking a quick nap."

Hongjun lit the stove for Li Jinglong and waited till he had fallen asleep before going to check on the other patients. After finishing his rounds, he followed

the winding corridor back to the training grounds near the entrance hall, where a number of soldiers were standing guard. Under the sun's bright glare, the ghost king finally showed a hint of emotion, his eyes squinched in pain beneath the ragged mess of his unbound hair as he stood trussed to the stone pillar. It seemed he feared the sun.

Hongjun suddenly remembered: the fallen corpse ghosts only ever acted at night or on days when it was snowing—that is, when there was no sun. They also appeared to fear Li Jinglong's heart lamp more than the average yaoguai.

Lu Xu was still waiting at the training grounds. Seeing that Hongjun and Li Jinglong's discussion had failed to yield results, he called urgently, "Hongjun!"

Hongjun held his hands out placatingly. "We'll figure something out."

Lu Xu followed Hongjun as he slowly walked up to the ghost king, stopping three paces away.

"Liu Fei?" Hongjun asked.

The ghost king's head hung limply over his chest, his hair rimed with ice. He lifted cloudy white eyes and stared at the youth in front of him.

"I'm a yao as well," Hongjun said.

The ghost king made no response.

Hongjun grabbed his jade peacock feather and held it out to the ghost king. "This belonged to my father. He was a yaoguai too. Liu Fei, why are you doing this?"

The ghost king didn't glance at the peacock feather, his eyes still trained on Hongjun. After a moment, he made a rattling sound in his throat.

Lu Xu suddenly turned and sprinted from the training grounds.

"Where are you going?" Hongjun called after him—but he had already disappeared. Hongjun turned back to the ghost king. "I heard how you saved Qin Liang. You're not evil. Liu Fei, our friends are dying. Can't you tell me why you're doing this?"

"Why does he look so out of it?" the carp yao asked from beside him. "Hongjun, the corpse ghosts are all dead—do you think their souls are still in their bodies?"

Hongjun's brow twisted into a knot as he recalled the bestiary Chong Ming had given him. The book contained information on all sorts of creatures, but held nothing of note on corpse ghosts. He studied the ghost king. "I feel like it's not so much that he doesn't want to speak as he *can't*—but what can we do…?"

As Hongjun pondered, he heard Lu Xu call out to him again. "Hongjun!"

Hongjun glanced back to see Lu Xu staggering back onto the training grounds, dragging Mergen with him. Startled, Hongjun rushed over to help. After laying unconscious for so long, Mergen was struggling to wake. He couldn't seem to stop coughing, and his body was ice-cold.

"He needs to go back and lie down," Hongjun said. "Lu Xu, why did you bring him here?"

Mergen was seriously ill; every step he took was laborious, body swaying as if he was walking on soft cotton. “Who…is this?” he gasped. “What—what’s going on?”

“Morning Star! Morning Star!” Lu Xu said urgently.

It seemed Lu Xu was determined to bring Mergen to the ghost king. Hongjun hurried to Mergen’s other side, slinging the man’s arm across his own shoulders. Lu Xu stretched out a hand, making a series of garbled noises and moving his hand in a circular motion before pressing his palm to Hongjun’s forehead. He pointed at the ghost king, then turned to look back at Mergen.

“What are you trying to say?” Mergen could barely keep his eyes open, his entire body slack with illness.

Lu Xu frantically repeated his performance, pressing his hand to Hongjun’s and the ghost king’s foreheads in turn while shooting meaningful glances at Mergen.

Suddenly Hongjun recalled the night he had been trapped in the throes of a nightmare. Mergen had woken him up and, after speaking an incantation, pressed his hand to Hongjun’s brow.

Realization dawned. Lu Xu knew about Mergen’s special ability—Mergen must have woken him up before in just the same way. Upon seeing the ghost king’s disoriented expression, Lu Xu had thought he was trapped in a dream!

“Mergen!” Hongjun said, “Wake him with your spiritual powers—dispel his nightmare!”

Mergen stared, incredulous. “But I’m so cold…” he said weakly.

“Bear with it just a little longer,” Hongjun said urgently.

“Forcing Mergen to use his spiritual powers when he’s half dead already—have you no conscience?!” the carp yao asked. “You should send him back to bed!”

With great effort, Mergen lifted a hand, eyes distant as he tried to dredge the words of the incantation out of his muddled brain.

Hongjun’s heart pounded in his chest. Perhaps he was being too callous, he thought. Lu Xu continued to make encouraging sounds from the side, but Mergen couldn’t raise his hand any higher. Hongjun stepped forward and lifted it for him. “You just focus on saying the incantation—or maybe you can teach it to me, and I can do it?”

Mergen shook his head. “It’s not something that can be taught.”

He spoke a few halting words, then took a deep breath, gathered his focus, and pressed his hand to the ghost king’s forehead.

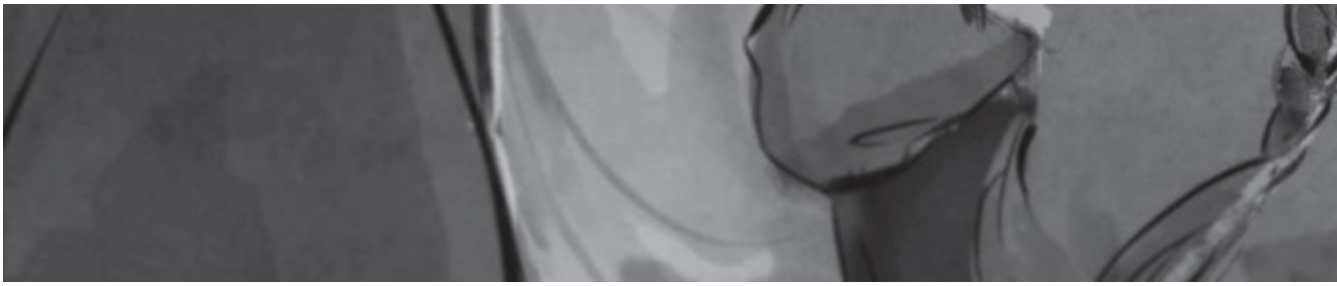
The enormous shadow of a gray-blue wolf stretched out behind Mergen. Rising from the ground, it turned toward the ghost king and threw its head back in a deafening howl.

In the sudden blast of energy, black flames erupted from the ghost king’s body and twisted back, as though buffeted by a stiff wind. Mergen shouted furiously, his hand shaking as he set his palm firmly against the ghost king’s brow.

The ghost king began to howl in pain, scrabbling at his restraints and dragging the iron chains against the ground.

Li Jinglong rushed out at the sound of the commotion to see Lu Xu and Hongjun supporting Mergen, who had his hand pressed to the ghost king's head. Baffled, he nevertheless hurried over to help. Agony flashed across Mergen's face as the dark energy behind the ghost king morphed into a monstrous creature. It roared toward Mergen, trying to swallow him whole, and the shadowy gray wolf began to fade.

Making a snap decision, Li Jinglong activated the heart lamp and slapped his hand against Mergen's back.



White light flooded Mergen's body, and the spiritual energy in his hand intensified, gathering into a tempest that lashed out at the black smoke behind the ghost king. The smoke creature howled as it scattered under the onslaught of the luminescent storm.

Mergen threw up a mouthful of blood, collapsing as his spiritual power faded and his palm went dark.

Lu Xu threw his arms around Mergen, keeping him upright as Hongjun and Li Jinglong stepped forward to catch the rest of his leaden body. The ghost king slowly lifted his head, the gray of his cloudy eyes gathering into his pupils. His brow creased as he examined the people standing before him, then tilted his head to take in the iron chains restraining his arms and legs.

In Yardang, snowflakes drifted from an overcast sky into a valley of stone.

Deep beneath the earth, hidden within a shroud of darkness, Zhang Hao dragged his battered body into a large tomb. A woman in white robes stood at the center of the cavernous space.

"You've spoiled everything, Zhang Hao," she said, her voice like ice. "The yao king won't let you off easy for this."

"How is it my fault?" Zhang Hao demanded. "I lost them once I crossed Yumen Pass, but the fallen-corpse-ghost army is still out there. Everything will be fine. We still have the rattle drum. All we have to do is sneak back to Liang Prefecture, free Liu Fei, and take back the general's sword…"

The woman in white whipped around and gritted out through clenched teeth, "Liu Fei has *woken up*."

Zhang Hao started in surprise, his teeth chattering as terror flickered across his face. As one, they turned and cast their gazes upward.

The vast chamber was filled with fifty thousand stone coffins arranged in neat rows, nearly half of which were empty. High above sat an open casket wrought from white jade, upon which were inscribed the partially visible words: *King of Jiangdu of Great Han, Liu*.

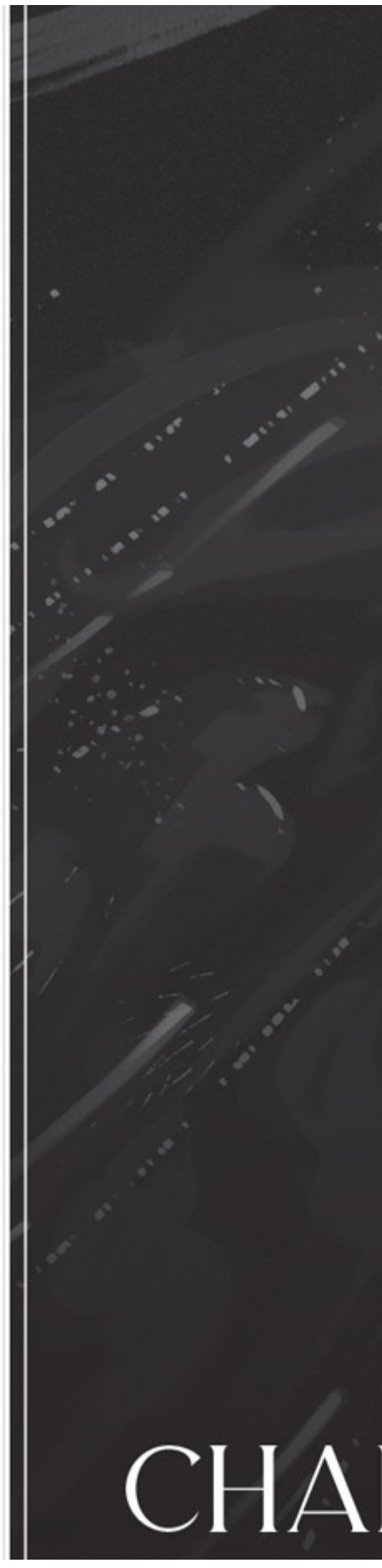
This casket, too, was empty.

Higher, at the very top of the chamber, stood a black coffin. Its inscription was blurred with age, but they could faintly make out the words *Great Qin*. Lying on top of the coffin was a child's toy—a tiny rattle drum.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Legend of Exorcism

VOLUME 3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Character & Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Legend of Exorcism is set during the Tianbao era (742–756 AD), the third regnal period of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. The Tianbao era saw the decline of the Tang dynasty, commonly regarded as the pinnacle of imperial Chinese civilization.

Many of the characters who appear in *Legend of Exorcism* are fictionalized versions of real historical figures contemporary to the setting, including Emperor Xuanzong himself, Li Longji, as well as Noble Consort Yang Yuhuan and Right Chancellor Yang Guozhong. The main members of the Department of Exorcism are fully fictional, though some of their family members are real historical figures.

Characters

MAIN CHARACTERS

KONG HONGJUN □□□: A half-yao boy from Yaojin Palace who is sent on a mission to expel the yao king of Chang'an.

LI JINGLONG □□□: Formerly a commandant of the Longwu Guard, an ordinary mortal who becomes the chief of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEMONIC EXORCISM

ZHAO ZILONG □□□: A carp yao and Hongjun's closest companion.

MERGEN □□□: A Shiwei tribesman with the ability to transform into a gray wolf.

TIGRA YAZDEGERD □□□ · □□□ (A-TAI □□): A Persian prince and last surviving descendant of the House of Sasan, as well as a disciple of Persian Zoroastrianism.

QIU YONGSI □□□: A Jiangnan scholar from West Lake sent to Chang'an to build his courage.

YAOJIN PALACE

CHONG MING □□: Leader of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's adoptive father; a phoenix.

QING XIONG □□: One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace; a peng.

KONG XUAN □□: One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's birth father; a peacock.

CHANG'AN

DI RENJIE □□□: Statesman and founder of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism (deceased).

THE DUCHESS OF GUO □□□□: Yang Yuhuan's elder sister.

EMPEROR XUANZONG □□□ (LI LONGJI □□□): The reigning emperor of Great Tang.

FENG CHANGQING □□□: A general of Great Tang and Li Jinglong's elder cousin.

GAO LISHI □□□: Chief Eunuch.

HU SHENG □□: Captain of the Longwu Guard and Li Jinglong's former superior.

HUANG YONG □□: Deputy Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review.

LI HENG □□: The crown prince of Great Tang.

QIN WU □□: Li Jinglong's former subordinate in the Longwu Guard.

YANG GUOZHONG □□□: Right Chancellor and Yang Yuhuan's cousin.

Yang Yuhuan □□□: Beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong, also known as Noble Consort Yang.

Yazi, Suanni, and Baxia □□, □□, □□: Three of the nine sons of the dragon.

LIANG PREFECTURE

GESHU HAN □□□: The military governor of Hexi and Duke of Liang.

LIU FEI □□: The king of the fallen corpse ghosts.

LU XU □□: A young scout from the border regions.

QIN LIANG □□: The prefect of Liang Prefecture, working under Geshu Han.

QIN XUAN □□: Qin Liang's daughter.

ZHANG HAO □□: An officer of the Hexi Patrol stationed in the capital of Liang Prefecture.

OTHER

XIE YU □□: A black jiao who escaped from the Dragon-Quelling Tower, formerly thought to be the yao king of Chang'an.

YUAN KUN □□: A yao known as the divine kun and a friend of Qing Xiong.

Name Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

-LAO: A suffix attached to the surname of venerated elders. Denotes a particularly high degree of respect.

-SHI: A suffix attached to the surname of a woman to denote her maiden name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

MEI/MEIMEI: A word meaning “little sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

Other

SHIFU: A word for “master” or “teacher.”

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Glossary

BUDDHISM: The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, which souls only escape by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as the Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

CULTIVATION: A practice in Daoism-inspired Chinese myth through which humans can achieve immortality and nonhuman creatures can acquire higher forms, more humanoid forms, or both. *(See Yao/Yaoguai for more information)*

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the dao (□ / "the way"). Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a "true human," safe from external harm and able to affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

DRAGONS: The long (□ / "dragon"), or zhenlong (□□ / "true dragon"), is a legendary creature that features prominently in Chinese mythology. Commonly depicted as a horned, snakelike creature with four legs, it is an auspicious symbol of the divine and historically associated with the emperor and imperial power.

According to one myth, the jiao (□) or jiaolong (□□ / "flood dragon"), a variety of hornless aquatic dragon, can transform into a "true" dragon by cultivating and passing heavenly tribulations.

According to another, a carp can transform into a dragon if it swims upstream against the current and leaps over the falls of the Yellow River at the Dragon Gate.

Dragons are said to have reproduced with a number of other species, resulting in the nine dragon's sons. The third son, Yazi, is a hybrid with a jackal; the fifth son, Suanni, has lionlike features; and the sixth son, Baxia, is the offspring of a true dragon and an azure dragon.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: The official system of examinations in ancient China that qualified someone for official service. It was a supposedly meritocratic system that allowed students from all backgrounds to rise up in society, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

The imperial examinations were divided into three rounds consisting of prefectural, metropolitan, and palace examinations. Those who passed the highest-level palace examinations were given the title of jinshi.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN: The Mandate of Heaven is the approval of heaven that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, over the people. If the emperor is not a virtuous ruler and fails to fulfill his

obligations, then he would lose the mandate and the right to govern. Signs of a loss of mandate include societal unrest and uprisings, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and so on.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic ranks, with rank one being the highest. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. The imperial examination was one path to becoming a court official, the other being referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official.

SABER/SWORD GLARE: An energy attack released from a bladed weapon's edge.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians, similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing. The appearance of the acupuncture points can also indicate a person's health; for example, darkness of the Yintang point between the brows portends an ill fate or even death.

TRUE FIRE OF SAMADHI: The true fire of Samadhi is a magical technique used by various fictional characters in Chinese literature including Red Boy and Sun Wukong from *Journey to the West* and Jiang Ziya from *The Investiture of the Gods*. Its primary characteristics are that it is unquenchable by water and can be shot from the eyes, nose, and mouth.

YAO/YAOGUAI: Living creatures and inorganic objects that have gained higher consciousness through absorbing the energy of the natural world and years of spiritual cultivation. Yao who have attained sufficiently high levels of cultivation can assume human form.

ZIWEI STAR: Ziwei, also known as Polaris, the North Star, represents the emperor or leadership. Under its protection, the emperor is believed to be immune to a number of supernatural attacks.

About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

Footnotes

Chapter 27: The Spring Oriole

[1] “Drinking vinegar” is slang for getting jealous, especially over a romantic interest.

[2] A genre of poetry set to music, named for the “music bureau,” which was originally responsible for collating or writing them. “Song of Yang Pass” is a musical setting of the popular poem “Seeing Yuan-Er Off to Anxi” by Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei.

[3] Lines from “Spring Longing” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[4] Lines from “Longing” by Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei.

[5] Lines from “The Moon over the River on a Spring Evening” by Tang dynasty poet Zhang Ruoxu.

Chapter 35: Throwing Knives Merge

[6] A word meaning “younger sister.”

[7] A word meaning “master” or “teacher.”

Chapter 39: Space Talisman

[8] A word meaning elder brother. It can be used as a suffix when referring to a male peer in casual conversation.

Chapter 41: A Reluctant Parting

[9] Lines from “Song of the Tiele,” a yuefu folk song from the Northern dynasties.

[10] Lines from “An Invitation to Wine” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[11] Lines from “A Farewell to Imperial Archivist Uncle Yun at Xie Tiao Tower in Xuanzhou” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 45: A Scout from the Northwest

[12] A line from “A Difficult Journey” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[13] Lines from “Listening to the Strains of the Flute with Wang Qi at Yumen Pass” by Tang dynasty poet Gao Shi.

Chapter 46: A Snowy Night at the Great Wall

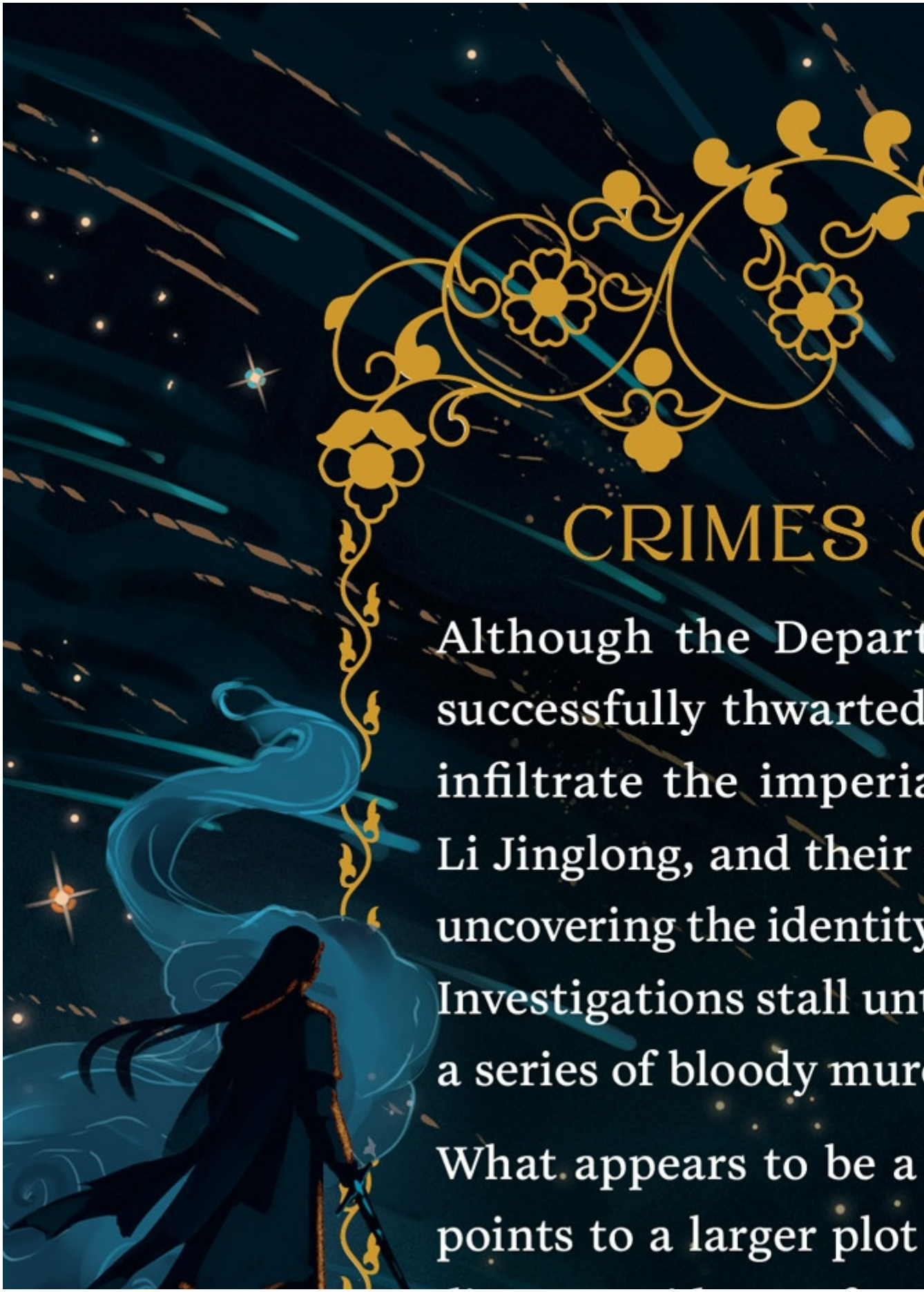
[14] The first of “Two Poems on Traveling Beyond the Border” by Tang dynasty poet Wang Changling.

Chapter 47: Han-Dynasty Corpse Soldiers

[15] The nineteenth solar term in the traditional Chinese calendar, Lidong marks the beginning of winter.

Chapter 48: Once Upon a Time in Yardang

[16] A suffix attached to the surname of venerated elders. Denotes a particularly high degree of respect.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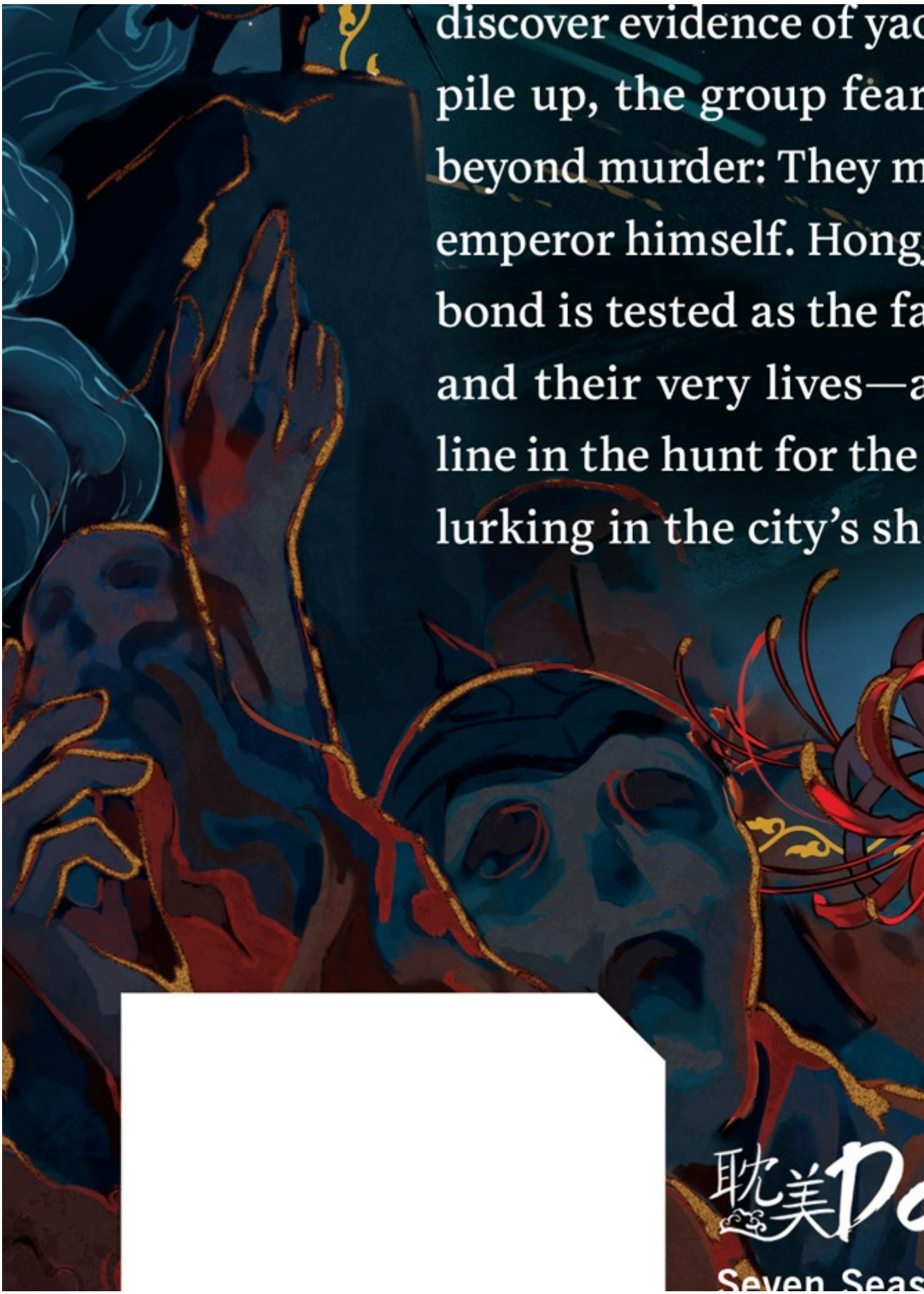
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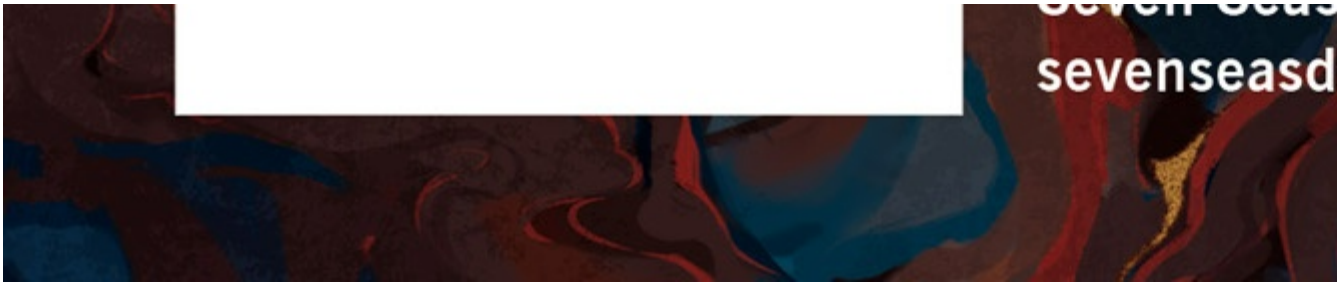
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